

**SERVICE BRANDING STRATEGIES AND CUSTOMER PATRONAGE OF
TELECOMMUNICATION FIRMS IN RIVERS STATE.**

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ABSTRACT

The study examined the relationship between Service Branding Strategies and Customer Patronage of Telecommunication Firms in Port Harcourt, Rivers State. The study addressed two (2) Objectives, answered two (2) research questions and tested two (2) hypotheses. The correlational research design was adopted in this study. The population consisted of 40 managers from four (4) telecommunications companies in Port Harcourt. The study used census sampling and studied the entire population. The reliability of the instrument was determined using the Cronbach's alpha test with the aid of Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 27, and it stood at 0.78, higher than the benchmark of 0.70. Descriptive and inferential statistics were used to analyze the data that were gathered for this study. The Pearson Product Moment Correlation Method was used to test various hypotheses formulated with the aid of the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 27.0. From the bivariate and multivariate analysis carried out, it was discovered that service branding strategies showed a positive and significant relationship with customer patronage of telecom firms in Rivers State. From the result of the analysis carried out, it was discovered that service quality, and service positioning strategy showed very strong and significant relationship with customer loyalty and repeat purchase of telecom firms in Rivers State. Based on the findings, the study concludes that service branding strategies (service quality and service positioning strategy) are significant predictors of customer patronage of telecom firms in Rivers State. The recommends amongst others that telecom firm in Rivers State especially those that are struggling to improve their customer patronage should adopt service branding strategies as it would improve their patronage level and telecom firms in Rivers State particularly those that are experiencing low level of customer patronage should adopt service positioning strategy as it would increase their level of customer patronage.

Keywords: *Service Branding Strategies, Service Quality, Service Positioning Strategy and Customer Patronage.*

INTRODUCTION

The telecommunication industry has experienced rapid growth worldwide, with increasing competition and an ever-expanding customer base. In today's global marketplace, companies are recognizing the critical role that service branding plays in distinguishing themselves in a highly competitive environment. Service branding strategies are essential for businesses in sectors like telecommunications to establish a strong connection with consumers, enhance their market presence, and build sustainable competitive advantages (Berry, 2000; Aaker, 1991). These strategies are multifaceted, focusing on the quality of services offered and the positioning of the brand in the minds of consumers (Kotler & Keller, 2016). In the telecommunication sector, service branding strategies, including service quality and service positioning; have become pivotal in influencing customer patronage, which includes loyalty and retention.

Customer patronage refers to the continuous relationship a customer maintains with a service provider, which can manifest in behaviors such as repeated purchase, positive word-of-mouth, and an overall preference for the brand. In the telecommunication sector, customer patronage is often reflected through customer loyalty and customer retention (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001). Customer loyalty is not just about repeat purchasing but is also influenced by emotional attachment, perceived value, and satisfaction with the services provided (Oliver, 1999). Furthermore, customer retention

refers to the ability of a company to retain its customers over time and is often seen as an indicator of long-term customer satisfaction and the success of service offerings (Reichheld & Sasser, 1990). In the telecommunication industry, customer patronage is critical because of the high switching costs involved in changing service providers, the essential nature of the services, and the evolving needs of customers (Shankar et al., 2003). This makes retaining customers a valuable metric for the success of telecom firms. Additionally, customer loyalty and retention can significantly reduce customer acquisition costs and contribute to a stable revenue base (Kumar & Shah, 2004).

Service branding strategies, specifically service quality and service positioning, are integral to building a strong brand presence and fostering customer patronage. Service quality refers to the degree to which a service meets or exceeds customer expectations (Parasuraman et al., 1985). In the telecommunication sector, the perceived quality of service includes factors such as network reliability, speed, customer service, and pricing. Telecommunication firms that consistently offer high-quality services tend to have higher customer satisfaction, which, in turn, increases customer loyalty and retention (Zeithaml et al., 1996). The SERVQUAL model, developed by Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry (1985), is widely used to assess service quality based on dimensions like tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy.

Service positioning is the strategic effort by a company to establish a distinct place in the market for its brand (Kotler & Keller, 2016). It involves differentiating the service offering in such a way that it resonates with customers' desires and needs. Effective positioning strategies enable telecommunication firms to create a unique value proposition, whether based on quality, innovation, or customer service (Porter, 1980). By positioning their brand effectively, firms can appeal to specific segments and foster long-term customer relationships.

Existing research highlights a strong relationship between service branding strategies and customer patronage, especially in competitive industries like telecommunications. Service quality has been shown to have a direct positive impact on customer satisfaction, which in turn influences customer loyalty and retention (Anderson et al., 1994). Similarly, service positioning contributes to how customers perceive a brand, which can affect their loyalty and willingness to continue using a service provider (Boulding et al., 1999). In the context of telecommunication firms, effective service branding strategies such as consistent service quality and clear market positioning are critical to building customer loyalty and ensuring customer retention. Research by Morgan & Hunt (1994) and Jones et al. (2000) suggests that when customers perceive high-quality service that aligns with their expectations, their likelihood of remaining loyal and satisfied with the service provider increases. Furthermore, firms that position their services to appeal to specific customer segments, based on factors such as price, reliability, or technological advancements, tend to achieve stronger customer loyalty (Ladhari, 2009).

Despite the extensive research on service branding strategies and customer patronage globally, there remains a gap in understanding the specific dynamics of service branding within the Nigerian telecommunication context, particularly in Rivers State. The region has a unique demographic and economic environment that influences consumer behavior, which may differ from other global or national markets. Moreover, while the importance of customer loyalty and retention is widely acknowledged, few studies have focused on the interplay between service quality, service positioning, and customer patronage specifically in the Nigerian telecommunication industry. This study seeks to fill this gap by examining the relationship between service branding strategies (service quality and service positioning) and customer patronage (loyalty and retention) in telecommunication firms in Rivers State. By doing so, the research aims to contribute to the understanding of how telecommunication firms can enhance customer loyalty and retention through effective service branding strategies.

Statement of the Problem

The telecommunication sector in Rivers State, Nigeria, has become increasingly competitive, with several firms vying for customer loyalty and market share. Despite the rapid growth of the industry

and the critical role telecommunication services play in the daily lives of consumers, many firms struggle to differentiate themselves from their competitors. This challenge is particularly evident in the area of customer patronage, which includes customer loyalty and retention. While service quality and effective service positioning are universally recognized as key drivers of customer satisfaction and long-term patronage, there is limited understanding of how these factors specifically influence customer behavior in the Nigerian context, particularly in Rivers State.

Telecommunication firms in the region face a unique set of challenges, including fluctuating network quality, inconsistent customer service, and high levels of customer churn. Despite significant investments in infrastructure and technology, many firms continue to experience challenges in maintaining a loyal customer base and ensuring long-term customer retention. This situation suggests that the relationship between service branding strategies—such as service quality and positioning—and customer patronage is not well understood or effectively leveraged within the local context.

Existing studies on service branding strategies and customer loyalty have largely focused on developed economies or other regions, with few addressing the dynamics within the Nigerian telecommunications market. This gap in the literature limits the ability of telecommunication firms in Rivers State to formulate targeted strategies that effectively build brand equity, foster customer loyalty, and reduce customer churn. Therefore, understanding the specific impact of service quality and service positioning on customer loyalty and retention in this region is crucial for the sustainable growth of telecommunication firms operating in Rivers State. This study seeks to address these gaps by examining the relationship between service branding strategies—specifically service quality and service positioning—and customer patronage (loyalty and retention) in telecommunication firms in Rivers State, Nigeria.

Conceptual/Operational Framework

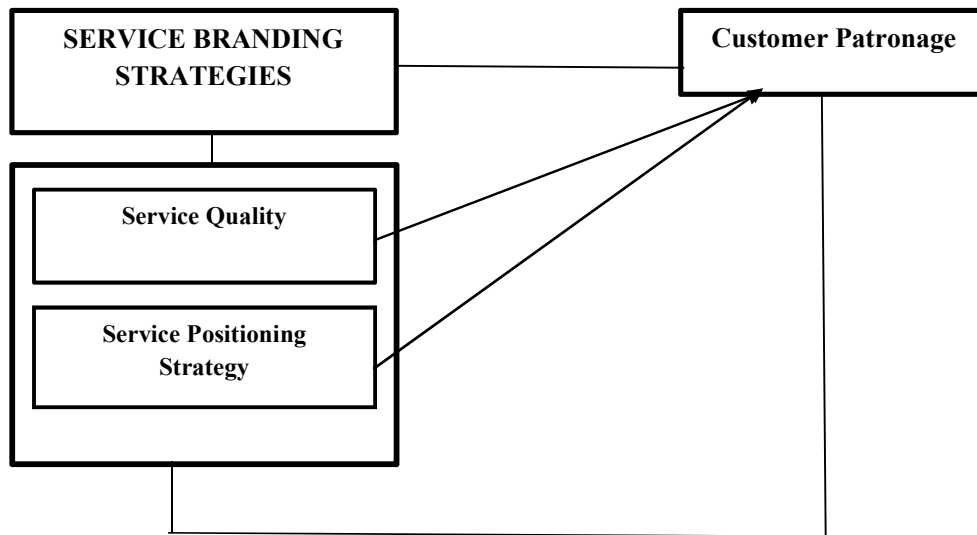


Figure 1.1: Conceptual framework of the relationship between service branding strategies and customer patronage.

Sources: Patibandla & Sanyal (2001); Rahmani-Nejad, et., al., (2014) Heaney & Heaney, (2008).

Aim and Objectives of the Study

The aim of this study is to examine the relationship Between Service Branding Strategies and Customer Patronage of Telecommunication Firms in Port Harcourt, Rivers State. The specific objectives of the study included to:

1. determine the relationship between service quality and customer patronage of telecommunication firms in Port Harcourt, Rivers State.
2. ascertain the relationship between service positioning strategy and customer patronage of telecommunication firms in Port Harcourt, Rivers State.

Research Questions

The following research questions were raised and answered:

1. what is the relationship between service quality relate to customer patronage of telecommunication firms in Port Harcourt, Rivers State?
2. What is the relationship between service positioning strategy and customer patronage of telecommunication firms in Port Harcourt, Rivers State?

Research Hypotheses

The following hypotheses were raised and tested:

- Ho₁: There is no significant relationship between service quality and customer patronage of telecommunication firms in Port Harcourt, Rivers State.
- Ho₂: There is no significant relationship between service positioning strategy and customer patronage of telecommunication firms in Port Harcourt, Rivers State.

Review of Related Literature

Theoretical Review

This study was anchored on IDIC Theory.

Identify, Differentiate, Interact and Customize (IDIC) Approach

The IDIC approach was developed by Pepper and Rogers in 1991. This theory states that a firm that is determined to improve and sustain its competitiveness should take four actions such as Identify, Differentiate, Interact and Customize, to build and maintain a good customer experience throughout the customer lifecycle. These actions are called Pepper and Rogers' IDIC approach to gain competitive advantage. Pepper and Rogers (1991) explained that a company must first of all *identify* who is its target customers and understand their behaviour. This is the best way to serve them better and profitably. After the company has identified its target customers, it can now *differentiate* these customers on the basis of their needs and value. Once the company has differentiated them according to their needs and value, the company should *interact* with them (customers) regularly to understand their needs and expectations, and more importantly what they think about its brand. Once differentiation is done based on customer value and needs, and constant interaction is maintained, the company should *customize* product or service in line with individual customer needs and values. Customization helps a company to build a long-term relationship with their customers.

Relevance of the Theory

IDIC approach is very useful in explaining how telecommunication firms can manage service brand to improve their competitiveness. This approach believes that telecommunication companies can provide a pleasant and memorable customer experience if they identify their actual customers, differentiate them according to their needs and values, interact with them (customers) constantly to understand what they actually needs, and customize their offerings.

Conceptual Review

Concept of Service Branding Strategy

Generally, service branding is an organizational effort aimed at creating and delivering services that are superior to what its competitors' offer. It tends to show the uniqueness of a company and the differentiating factors from competitors' services. The aim of service branding is to create a recognized and lovable service brand for the company (Doyle, 2001). Similarly, Coleman (2010) defined service branding as the process of creating and placing an organization's brand name, image and reputation in the minds of the consumers. Boateng (2015) described service branding in terms of "making," "enabling" and "keeping promises." Einwiller and Will (2002) stated that service branding is a systematic process of creating and maintaining favourable image and reputation of an organization by sending signals to all stakeholders especially customers.

Gray (2006) opined that service branding brings about a set of observable activities to induce customer preference for the company's services. It is about differentiating the company's service brand from competitors' own, attract the right people to the firm and communicating effectively with customers regarding the uniqueness of the brand (McDonald et al, 2001). Riley and de Chernatony (2000) noted that customers' preference for a company's services increase when they see the kind of innovation the company has introduced how it treats its customers and it adheres to the environmental and labour standards of the country.

Service branding help an organization to make its services unique in the minds of customers and attract new customers to the organization while at the same time retaining existing ones. According to Waraass and Solbakki (2009), companies that engage in service branding tend to promote their identity and uniqueness to all stakeholders. Some companies invest heavily on branding because they understand its potentials in improving their marketing competitiveness. Effective management of branding activities would lead to creation of favourable brand reputation. Harsha et al (2011) stated that a company's brand is represented by the perceptions, feelings, thoughts and experiences in the minds of the people, and what people have heard, seen, learnt and felt about the brand overtime.

Dimensions of Service Branding Strategies

The most common service branding strategies adopted by service organizations including telecom firms are service quality, service differentiation strategy and service positioning strategy (Riley & de Chernatony, 2000; McDonald et al, 2001; Gray, 2006; Heaney & Heaney, 2008; Coleman, 2010; Harsha et al, 2011). The dimensions of service branding strategies are discussed in details below:

Service Quality

Service quality refers to the degree to which a service meets or exceeds customer expectations (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1985). According to Zeithaml et al. (1996), service quality encompasses various dimensions, including tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy, which collectively shape the overall customer experience. Service quality is particularly critical in the telecommunication industry, where consumers expect consistent network performance, responsive customer service, and timely resolution of issues (Sadeghi & Rezaei, 2019). The SERVQUAL model, developed by Parasuraman et al. (1985), remains a dominant framework in assessing service quality, as it helps businesses identify gaps between customer expectations and perceptions of the actual service provided.

Several authors have explored the impact of service quality on customer satisfaction and loyalty in various sectors. For instance, Anderson et al. (1994) argue that high service quality results in greater customer satisfaction, which subsequently enhances customer loyalty and retention. A similar study by Boulding et al. (1999) in the context of service-based industries found that customers who perceive high service quality are more likely to exhibit greater loyalty toward the service provider. This underscores the importance of service quality in shaping customer patronage, particularly in the highly competitive telecommunications market.

Service Positioning Strategy

Service positioning refers to the strategic effort by a company to differentiate its service offerings in the minds of consumers (Kotler & Keller, 2016). The positioning of a service influences how customers perceive the brand, which can significantly affect their purchase behavior and loyalty. Positioning strategies may include emphasizing unique service features, customer service excellence, cost efficiency, or technological advancements (Porter, 1980). For telecommunication firms, clear service positioning can help distinguish their offerings in a crowded market, where differentiation often comes down to factors like pricing, service reliability, and customer experience. Effective positioning enables firms to align their service attributes with the specific needs and preferences of target customer segments, thereby increasing their market share and fostering customer loyalty (Ladhari, 2009). As argued by Aaker (1991), successful service positioning creates a unique brand identity that resonates with consumers, making them more likely to remain loyal to the brand. This relationship between positioning and customer patronage is particularly important in the Nigerian telecommunications sector, where consumers are highly price-sensitive, yet demand high service quality.

Concept Customer Patronage

Patronage refers to the repeated and continued purchasing or usage of a service by a customer. In this regard, customer patronage in telecommunications can be seen as the ongoing use of a service provider's offerings, resulting from the satisfaction and trust that the consumer has developed over time. Ding et al (2015) defined customer patronage as choice behaviour whereby a customer prefers to patronize an organization over others in the same industry. Here, customer patronage represents the preference for a company's products or services. Garga and Bambale (2016) defined customer patronage as the extent to which a customer patronizes a particular company's products or services based on the result of his or her assessment and personal experience. Osman in Kumar (2016) proposed more simplified definition of patronage behaviour of consumer as "the repeat purchase behaviour at a particular company for either the same products or any other products."

Customer patronage is the only economic and social justification for the existence of any business and this existence is to create customer satisfaction (Garga & Bambale, 2016). When customers are satisfied with their quality of service delivery, they are more likely to consistently patronize the company. Managers have to fully understand what drives customer patronage intention (Choi & Chu, 2001). Understanding customer patronage intention would help managers to predict their future purchasing behaviour. Managers can get information on customer patronage intention by assessing their level of satisfaction toward their services rendered. This information would help them influence consumer patronage decisions by delivery top quality services that customers expect and at a fair price (Panda, 2013).

Increasing customer patronage seems to be the only way for these organizations to compete favourably in the market and survive. As new companies are being established, the need to intensify efforts to boost customer patronage becomes necessary for the existing companies. Intensifying efforts to increase customer patronage include the pursuit of service branding strategies that can increase customer patronage and improve their competitiveness. As Amelia (2017) rightly stated, companies need to brand their services in order to increase customer patronage and survive in their industry.

Empirical Review

Dranove et al (2003) examined how differentiation among health maintenance organizations affects local market competition. The researchers divided into two groups; those that serve regional or national markets, and those that serve only the local markets. The authors then used the equilibrium model of entry and product choice to analyze how HMOs of one group affect the profitability of the other group. They found out that the two groups of HMOs have strong competitive impacts with the segments of the market served. The study concluded that the competitive effect of different firms is negligible.

Shivashankar and Uma (2017) empirically examined brand positioning and customer perception towards apparels in Bangalore. They studied three different brands of jeans namely Wrangler, Lee and Levi Strauss brands with a particular focus on their attributes, looks, durability, quality, benefits, price, image and aesthetic value. The researchers used a structured questionnaire to elicit data from 40 consumers regarding their perception on the attributes, looks, durability, quality, benefits, price, image and aesthetic value of the three brands of jean. After a simple analysis, it was revealed that consumers ranked Lee brand higher, followed by Levi Strauss brand, and then Wrangler on the basis of attributes, looks, durability, quality, benefits, price, image and aesthetic value. The study concluded that brand positioning enhance customer loyalty.

Kamau and Wafula (2015) examined the effects of strategic positioning of service delivery on customer satisfaction. The study employed qualitative and quantitative approaches to analyze the variables of the study. The researchers adopted a descriptive research design where questionnaire was used to elicit data from 67 customers and staff of Fina Bank in Mombosa, Kenya. The data collected by the researchers were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics, as well as the Pearson's product moment correlation which was computed using the SPSS version 21.0. The result revealed that all the strategic positioning strategies (such as technological advancement, product classification, customer segmentation and brand benefits) has a positive impact on customer satisfaction.

Amelia (2017) carried out an empirical study on how product differentiation strategy and service quality build competitive advantage in the hospitality industry in Indonesia. The researcher adopted a quantitative approach where data were collected from 100 visitors to Five Star Hotel in Jakarta.

The multiple regression analysis was used to analyze the data collected and the result showed that product and service differentiations significantly enhance customer patronage in the hospitality industry. The study also revealed that product and service differentiations significantly the competitiveness of firms in the hospitality industry.

Akekue-Alex and Kalu (2016) empirically examined the relationship between positioning strategies and customer patronage of fast food firms in Port Harcourt, Nigeria. The researchers adopted a descriptive research design where a self-administered questionnaire was used to collect data from 123 fast food employees in Port Harcourt Metropolis. The data collected were analyzed using multiple regression analysis with the aid of SPSS version 20.0 and GRETl software packages. The result revealed that there was insignificant relationship between all positioning strategies (customer expectation, location, service quality and assortment) and customer patronage. The study also reported that only 2.5% of the variation in customer patronage was explained by the joint influence of customer expectation, location, service quality and assortment.

METHODOLOGY

The positivism cum quantitative approach to research was adopted in this study. Also, the correlational research design was adopted. The population consisted of 40 managers from four (4) telecommunications companies in Port Harcourt. The study used census sampling and studied the entire population. The reliability of the instrument was determined using the Cronbach's alpha test with the aid of Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 27, and it stood at 0.78, higher than the benchmark of 0.70. Descriptive and inferential statistics were used to analyze the data that were gathered for this study. The Pearson Product Moment Correlation Method was used to test various hypotheses formulated with the aid of the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 27.0.

Data Analysis and Presentation

Questionnaire Distribution and Retrieval

No. of Questionnaire Issued	No. of Questionnaire Returned	Useful Questionnaire	Not Useful	%
40	35	35	-	88

Source; survey Data, 2025.

The table above shows the questionnaire distribution and retrieval. The researcher issued 40 copies of questionnaire and from consistent visit, retrieved 35, 35 copies were useful. This represent 88% response rate and it was considered significant for the study.

Demographic Analysis

The demographic variables of the respondents were presented and analyzed in this section. The demographic variables include age and gender of the respondents.

Gender	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Valid MALE	20	57	57
FEMALE	15	43	43
Total	35	100.0	100.0

Source: field survey, 2025.

Table above shows the gender distribution of the respondents used for the study. 20 respondents which represent 57 percent of the population were males while the remaining 15 respondents which represent 43 percent of the population were females.

Bivariate Analysis
This was done using the PPMC and the Partial Correlation
Test of Hypothesis one (1)

Ho₁: There is no significant relationship between service quality and customer patronage of telecommunication firms in Rivers State.

Correlations

			service quality	customer patronage
Pearson (r)	service quality	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.738*
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.037
		N	35	35
	customer patronage	Correlation Coefficient	.738*	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.037	.
		N	35	35

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

SPSS output, 2025.

The output analyzed the extent to which service quality relate with customer patronage of telecommunication firms in Rivers State. Pearson correlation co-efficient indicates a strong association between the two variables ($r = 0.738$). The test of significance indicates that with $P 0.037 < 0.05$ we reject the null hypothesis which states that there is no significant relationship between service quality and customer patronage of telecommunication firms in Rivers State. Thus, higher levels of service quality were associated with higher levels of customer patronage of telecommunication firms in Rivers State.

Test of Hypothesis Two (2)

Ho₂: There is no significant relationship between service positioning strategy and customer patronage of telecommunication firms in Rivers State.

Correlations

			service positioning strategy	customer patronage
Pearson (r)	service positioning strategy	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.857**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.007
		N	35	35
	customer patronage	Correlation Coefficient	.857**	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.007	.
		N	35	35

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

SPSS output, 2025.

The output analyzed the extent to which after service positioning strategy relate with customer patronage of telecommunication firms in Rivers State. Pearson correlation co-efficient indicates a strong association between the two variables ($R_s = 0.857$). The test of significance indicates that with $P.007 < 0.05$ we can reject the null hypothesis which states that there is no significant relationship between service positioning strategy and customer patronage of telecommunication firms in Rivers State. Thus, higher levels of service positioning strategy were associated with higher levels of customer patronage of telecommunication firms in Rivers State.

Summary of Findings

The following findings were discovered:

- i. There is a significant relationship between service quality and customer patronage of telecommunication firms in Rivers State.
- ii. There is a significant relationship between service positioning strategy and customer patronage of telecommunication firms in Rivers State.

Discussion of Findings

From the bivariate and multivariate analysis carried out, it was discovered that service branding strategies showed a positive and significant relationship with customer patronage of telecommunication firms in Rivers State. From the result of the analysis carried out, it was discovered that service quality showed very strong and significant relationship with customer patronage of telecommunication firms in Rivers State. This finding is in line with the study of Venetis and Ghauri (2004) who submitted that service quality is considered one of the important factors contributing to the overall profitability of firms. This importance is explained by two core functions. First, service quality is one of the few factors that plays a vital role in differentiating services and providing service firms to gain competitive advantage by attracting more customers and contributing to the market share. Second, service quality is regarded as a key factor to retain customers.

This study found a very strong positive and significant relationship between service positioning strategy, customer patronage of telecommunication firms in Rivers State. This finding was deduced from the result of the bivariate analysis carried out on the variables in the third and fourth hypothesis. The result revealed that service differentiation strategy has a very strong positive correlation with customer patronage of telecommunication firms ($r = .857$ and 901) and this correlation is significant at 0.01 and 0.05 level. Consequently, the null hypotheses 4 and 5 were rejected and the alternate hypotheses were accepted. This finding is supported by Shivashankar and Uma (2017) who noted that positioning strategies has the ability to increase customer satisfaction level in the service industry. Kamau and Wafula (2015) also supported this finding when he stated that service positioning has a positive and significant relationship with customer satisfaction. This finding is also consistent with the research conducted by Akekue-Alex and Kalu (2016) which reported that service positioning positively and significantly influence the level of customer patronage of firms. The study conducted by Hartmann et al (2002) also supported this finding when the researcher reported that that customers frequently patronize those companies whose services occupy a distinct position in their minds.

CONCLUSION:

Based on the results of the analysis carried out, it is confirmed that service branding strategies are capable of improving customer patronage of telecommunication firms. The results of this study proved this fact as service quality service was found to be a strong and significant predictor of customer patronage as measured by customer patronage. Again service differentiation strategy was found to be a strong and significant predictor of customer patronage. Also, service positioning strategy showed a strong and significant predictor of customer patronage. Based on these findings, it was concluded that service branding strategies (service quality and service positioning strategy) are significant predictors of customer patronage of telecommunication firms in Rivers State.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

The following recommendations are provided based on the findings of this study:

1. That, telecommunication firms in Rivers State especially those that are struggling to improve their customer patronage should adopt service branding strategies as it would improve their patronage level.
2. That, telecommunication firms in Rivers State should position their services on the basis of quality as it would increase the level of customer satisfaction and retention.

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