

BRAND POSITIONING AND CUSTOMER RETENTION OF FILLING STATION OPERATORS IN PORT HARCOURT

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ABSTRACT

This study empirically examined the relationship between Brand Positioning and Customer retention of filling station operators in Port Harcourt. 2 objectives, 2 research questions and 2 hypotheses were formulated to guide the study. This study adopted the correlational survey research. The population of this study comprised of 400 registered filling stations operating in Port Harcourt. The information was obtained from Petroleum Products Retail Outlets Owners Association of Nigeria (PETROAN). The sample size of 196 was derived using Krejcie and Morgan Table. A total of one hundred and ninety-six (196) customers were used as the study subjects. The Pearson Product Moment Correlation (PPMC) was used in testing the relationship between brand positioning and customer retention of filling station operators in Port Harcourt and the analysis was conducted with the aid of the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). Given the empirical results of this study, it was established that brand positioning showed a significant relationship with customer retention of filling station operators in Port Harcourt. Brand quality showed a significant relationship with customer loyalty and customer referrals. Similarly, brand identity showed a significant relationship with customer loyalty, customer referrals. The study concluded that filling station operators that strategically manage their brand positioning can achieve higher profitability, greater customer retention, and increased customer referrals. This study recommends that filling station operators should consistently invest in quality control and innovation to enhance brand perception and customer trust and they should strengthen brand identity by developing cohesive and recognizable branding elements, including logos, color schemes, and messaging, to ensure brand consistency and stronger market presence.

*Keywords: **Brand Positioning, Brand Quality, Brand Identity, Customer Retention, Customer Referrals.***

INTRODUCTION

The petroleum industry plays a crucial role in Nigeria's economy, contributing significantly to its Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and providing employment opportunities (Nwosu & Duru, 2021). Within this sector, filling station operators serve as key intermediaries between petroleum marketers and consumers, ensuring the availability and distribution of fuel across various regions, including Port Harcourt. However, due to intense competition, fluctuating fuel prices, and regulatory challenges, filling station operators must adopt strategic branding initiatives to maintain a loyal customer base (Okonkwo & Ibe, 2020).

In today's dynamic business environment, brand positioning has become an essential tool for creating a competitive advantage. It involves establishing a distinct place for a brand in the minds of consumers through elements such as brand quality and brand identity (Kotler & Keller, 2019). Brand quality reflects the perceived reliability, efficiency, and superiority of a product or service, influencing customer trust and satisfaction (Aaker, 2020). Meanwhile, brand identity refers to the visual, emotional, and communicative attributes that differentiate a brand from competitors, shaping consumer perceptions and brand loyalty (Kapferer, 2018). In the context of filling stations, effective brand positioning can enhance consumer confidence and foster repeat patronage.

Despite the importance of brand positioning, customer retention remains a significant challenge for filling station operators in Port Harcourt. The ability to retain customers depends not only on fuel availability but also on service quality, branding efforts, and customer referrals (Ogunbiyi & Olayemi,

2022). Customer referrals, which occur when satisfied customers recommend a business to others, serve as a powerful retention strategy by reinforcing positive brand perceptions and encouraging word-of-mouth marketing (Zeithaml et al., 2021). Research suggests that businesses with strong brand positioning are more likely to benefit from customer referrals, ultimately leading to increased retention rates (Hassan & Adeniyi, 2020).

While several studies have explored brand positioning and customer retention in different industries (Adebayo et al., 2019; Chukwu & Okafor, 2021), limited research has specifically examined the relationship between brand quality, brand identity, and customer referrals in the context of filling stations in Port Harcourt. Most existing literature focuses on general service quality and customer satisfaction, overlooking the unique branding challenges faced by filling station operators. This study aims to bridge this gap by analyzing how brand positioning strategies relates with customer retention through customer referrals, offering practical insights for filling station operators seeking to improve brand loyalty and business performance.

Statement of the Problem

Customer retention is a critical determinant of business success in the oil and gas sector, where competition is intense, and customer preferences are increasingly dynamic. In Port Harcourt, Nigeria, filling station operators face significant challenges in retaining their customers due to factors such as inconsistent product quality, lack of strong brand identity, and inadequate customer engagement strategies. The inability to sustain customer loyalty and foster referrals often results in high customer churn rates, reduced profitability, and a weakened competitive position in the market (Reichheld, 2003).

Despite the growing awareness of the importance of customer retention, many filling station operators in Port Harcourt have continued to focus disproportionately on customer acquisition strategies while neglecting the critical role of retention. Retaining customers is particularly important in this industry due to its reliance on repeat patronage and word-of-mouth marketing, which are more cost-effective and sustainable than acquiring new customers (Eze & Ndubuisi, 2020). However, low retention rates persist, often attributed to weak brand positioning strategies. Many firms fail to establish perceived quality or create compelling brand identities that resonate with their target customers, leading to low emotional attachment and limited customer loyalty (Zeithaml, 1988; Kapferer, 2012).

Research has demonstrated that effective brand positioning strategies, particularly those emphasizing brand quality and brand identity, can mitigate customer retention challenges. Brand quality enhances customer satisfaction and trust by ensuring consistency in products and services, while a strong brand identity fosters emotional connections that encourage loyalty and advocacy (Keller, 2013). Yet, there is a dearth of empirical evidence on how these strategies can be adapted to address the unique challenges faced by filling station operators in Port Harcourt. Existing studies have primarily focused on developed markets, leaving a gap in understanding how cultural, social, and economic factors influence the efficacy of brand positioning in this context (Obi & Nwachukwu, 2018). Therefore, this study seeks to address these problems by examining the relationship between brand positioning strategies and customer retention of filling station operators in Port Harcourt.

Conceptual/Operational Framework

The conceptual/operational framework of Brand positioning strategies and customer retention of filling station operators in Port Harcourt.

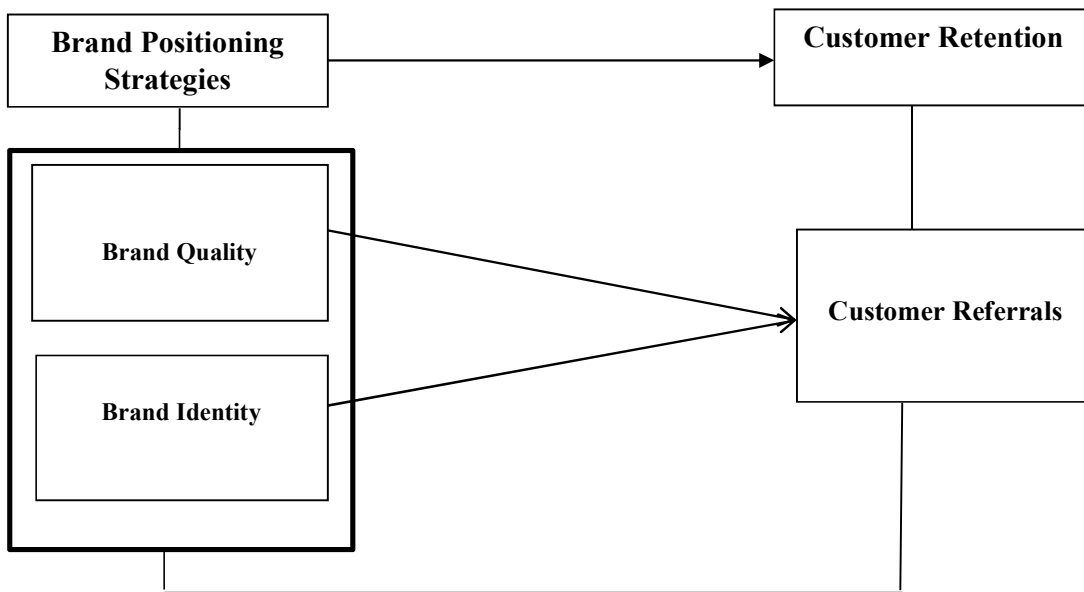


Figure 1.1: Conceptual framework showing the relationship between Brand Positioning Strategies and Customer retention.

Sources: Hakirevic (2021); Kheng et al (2016); Algammash (2020).

Objectives of the Study

The aim of this study is investigate the relationship between Brand Positioning Strategies and Customer retention of filling station operators in Port Harcourt. The specific objectives will be to:

- i. examine the relationship between brand quality and customer referrals of filling station operators in Port Harcourt.
- ii. examine the relationship between brand identity and customer referrals of filling station operators in Port Harcourt.

Research Questions

This study was guided by the following research questions:

- i. What is the relationship between brand quality and customer referrals of filling station operators in Port Harcourt?
- ii. What is the relationship between brand identity and customer referrals of filling station operators in Port Harcourt?

Research Hypotheses

The following null hypotheses were formulated to guide this study:

H0₁: There is no significant relationship between brand quality and customer referrals of filling station operators in Port Harcourt.

H0₂: There is no significant relationship between brand identity and customer referrals of filling station operators in Port Harcourt.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Concept of Brand Positioning Strategies

Brand positioning is a strategic marketing concept that involves creating a distinct and compelling image of a brand in the minds of consumers. The goal is to differentiate the brand from its competitors by emphasizing its unique value propositions and benefits, thereby making it more attractive and memorable to the target audience (Kotler & Keller, 2023). Effective brand positioning

requires a deep understanding of the target market's needs, preferences, and perceptions, as well as a clear articulation of the brand's core attributes and values. This strategic process is crucial for building a strong brand identity, fostering customer loyalty, and achieving long-term business success.

One of the key aspects of brand positioning is identifying the specific market segment that the brand intends to serve. This involves segmenting the market based on various criteria such as demographics, psychographics, behavioral patterns, and geographic factors. Once the target segment is identified, the brand must develop a positioning statement that succinctly captures its unique selling proposition (USP) and the key benefits it offers to consumers (Aaker, 2022). This positioning statement serves as a guiding framework for all marketing communications and brand interactions, ensuring consistency and coherence in the brand's messaging.

In today's digital age, brand positioning has evolved to encompass online and offline touchpoints, making it imperative for brands to maintain a consistent presence across multiple channels. Digital marketing platforms such as social media, websites, and online advertising provide opportunities for brands to engage with consumers in more personalized and interactive ways. This digital engagement is critical for reinforcing the brand's positioning and building stronger relationships with the target audience (Smith & Zook, 2022). For example, oil and gas brand might use social media to share informative content about health and wellness, thereby positioning itself as a trusted authority in the industry.

Moreover, brand positioning is not a static process but an ongoing endeavor that requires continuous monitoring and adaptation. Market dynamics, consumer preferences, and competitive landscapes are constantly evolving, necessitating regular updates to the brand's positioning strategy. This agility ensures that the brand remains relevant and resonant with its audience over time (Kapferer, 2022). Companies must stay attuned to emerging trends, feedback from consumers, and changes in the competitive environment to refine their positioning strategies accordingly. For instance, the growing emphasis on sustainability and ethical practices might prompt oil and gas firm to reposition its brand as eco-friendly and socially responsible.

Effective brand positioning also involves internal alignment within the organization. All departments, from marketing and sales to research and development, must collaborate to ensure that the brand's positioning is consistently reflected in every aspect of the business. This internal coherence reinforces the brand's external messaging and strengthens its overall market presence (Hollensen, 2022). For instance, oil and gas Company's commitment to innovation and quality must be evident not only in its marketing communications but also in its product development processes and customer service practices. Brand positioning is a dynamic strategy that plays a pivotal role in the success of a brand. It involves creating a unique and compelling image of the brand in the minds of consumers, differentiating it from competitors, and consistently communicating its core value propositions. In the oil and gas sector, effective brand positioning can drive customer retention, enhance customer loyalty, and support long-term business growth. By continuously adapting to market changes and leveraging digital engagement, filling station operators can maintain a strong and relevant brand presence, ultimately achieving their strategic objectives and delivering superior value to their customers.

Dimensions of Brand Positioning Strategies

Brand positioning strategy is a multi-dimensional construct. A survey of literature shows that different dimensions were used to measure brand positioning strategy. For instance, Sternthal and Craig in Hashmi et al (2014) used reliability, expertise and pleasant appearance to measure brand positioning strategy. Wang and Yang (2010) measured positioning strategy using trustworthiness, identity, brand integrity and brand differentiation, while Erdem and Swait (2004) utilized brand identity, brand quality and brand image as the key dimensions to measure brand positioning strategy. However, the dimensions of brand positioning strategy considered in this study are brand

quality, brand identity and brand differentiation. These dimensions of brand positioning strategies are discussed in details below:

Brand Quality

Brand quality refers to the perception of the overall excellence or superiority of a product or service offered by a brand, as judged by consumers. It encompasses various dimensions, including the product's performance, reliability, durability, and the degree to which it meets or exceeds customer expectations (Aaker, 2022). A high perception of brand quality is crucial for building strong brand equity, fostering customer loyalty, and driving repeat purchases. In the oil and gas sector, brand quality is particularly significant due to the critical nature of the products and the trust required from consumers and healthcare professionals.

The perception of brand quality is influenced by both intrinsic and extrinsic factors. Intrinsic factors include the tangible attributes of the product, such as its ingredients, efficacy, and safety. For oil and gas products, these factors are paramount as they directly affect patient health outcomes. Extrinsic factors, on the other hand, include elements such as packaging, branding, and marketing communications. These factors shape the consumer's overall impression and confidence in the brand (Keller, 2023). For example, oil and gas firm that consistently communicates its commitment to rigorous quality control and research might be perceived as offering higher-quality products.

A crucial aspect of brand quality is its impact on consumer trust and loyalty. When consumers perceive a brand as high quality, they are more likely to develop a strong emotional connection with it, leading to increased loyalty and advocacy (Kapferer, 2022). In the context of oil and gas, this trust is essential as consumers rely heavily on the efficacy and safety of the medications they use. High-quality brands often experience lower price sensitivity among consumers, allowing them to command premium pricing and achieve better financial performance. This phenomenon is supported by recent studies which indicate that consumers are willing to pay more for brands they perceive as higher quality, even in highly competitive markets (Oliver, 2023).

Brand quality also plays a vital role in differentiating a brand from its competitors. In saturated markets where numerous brands offer similar products, perceived quality can be a key differentiator. Oil and gas companies that successfully communicate their commitment to quality through certifications, clinical trials, and endorsements by health authorities can gain a competitive advantage (Johnson & Scholes, 2023). For instance, a oil and gas company that highlights its adherence to international quality standards and regulatory compliance can position itself as a trusted and reliable choice for both healthcare professionals and patients.

Moreover, the relationship between brand quality and customer satisfaction is well-documented. High-quality brands tend to have higher levels of customer satisfaction because they consistently meet or exceed customer expectations (Zeithaml, et., al., 2022). Satisfied customers are more likely to recommend the brand to others, contributing to positive word-of-mouth and enhancing the brand's reputation. In the oil and gas sector, positive recommendations from satisfied patients and healthcare professionals can significantly boost a brand's credibility and market reach.

Maintaining and enhancing brand quality requires a comprehensive and proactive approach. Companies must invest in continuous research and development to innovate and improve their products. This includes conducting extensive clinical trials, investing in advanced manufacturing processes, and implementing stringent quality control measures. Additionally, filling station operators must engage in transparent communication with their consumers, providing clear and accurate information about their products' benefits and risks (Hollensen, 2022). This transparency helps build trust and reinforces the perception of quality.

The digital era has further amplified the importance of brand quality. With the rise of online reviews, social media, and digital health platforms, consumers have more access to information and peer feedback than ever before. Oil and gas companies must actively monitor and manage their online reputation, addressing any concerns or negative feedback promptly to maintain their quality image (Smith & Zook, 2022). Engaging with consumers through digital channels also provides opportunities

to educate them about the brand's quality commitments and gather valuable insights for continuous improvement.

Brand quality is a complex concept that significantly influences consumer perceptions, trust, and loyalty. It is particularly critical in the oil and gas sector, where the stakes are high and consumer trust is paramount. High perceived quality not only differentiates a brand from its competitors but also drives customer satisfaction, loyalty, and financial performance. To maintain and enhance brand quality, filling station operators must invest in rigorous quality control, continuous innovation, and transparent communication. As the digital landscape evolves, actively managing online reputation and engaging with consumers becomes increasingly important for reinforcing the perception of quality. Ultimately, a strong commitment to brand quality can lead to sustained success and competitive advantage in the market.

Brand Identity

Brand identity is a complex concept that encompasses all the visual, verbal, and emotional elements that collectively create a distinctive image of a brand in the minds of consumers. It includes tangible aspects such as logos, colors, typography, and packaging, as well as intangible aspects like brand values, personality, and the overall experience the brand promises (Aaker, 2022). Brand identity is not just about how a brand looks or sounds, but also about the feelings and perceptions it evokes. A strong brand identity is essential for differentiating a brand from its competitors, fostering customer loyalty, and building lasting brand equity.

A fundamental component of brand identity is the brand's visual elements. These include the logo, color palette, typography, and design style, which together create a recognizable and memorable visual signature for the brand. The logo, as the most prominent visual symbol, plays a crucial role in representing the brand's essence and values. Effective logos are simple, versatile, and memorable, making it easy for consumers to identify and connect with the brand (Keller, 2023). For instance, the consistent use of specific colors and design elements can evoke particular emotions and associations, such as trust, reliability, or innovation, which are critical in industries like oil and gas where consumer trust is paramount.

Another critical aspect of brand identity is the brand's verbal elements, including the brand name, tagline, and messaging. These elements convey the brand's voice and tone, reflecting its personality and values. The brand name should be distinctive, easy to remember, and aligned with the brand's overall identity and market positioning. The tagline, often a concise and impactful statement, encapsulates the brand's promise and core message. Consistent and coherent messaging across all communication channels reinforces the brand identity, ensuring that consumers receive a unified and clear message about what the brand stands for (Hollensen, 2022). For example, a oil and gas brand's tagline might emphasize its commitment to quality and innovation, resonating with both healthcare professionals and patients.

Brand identity also involves the emotional and experiential aspects of the brand. This includes the brand's personality, which can be thought of as the human traits attributed to the brand, such as being caring, innovative, or trustworthy. The personality of a brand helps to create an emotional connection with consumers, making the brand more relatable and engaging (Kapferer, 2022). In the oil and gas sector, where consumer trust and confidence are critical, a brand personality that conveys professionalism, care, and reliability can significantly enhance the brand's appeal. This emotional bond is reinforced through consistent brand experiences across all touchpoints, from advertising and customer service to product usage.

The development and management of brand identity require a strategic and holistic approach. It involves defining the core values and mission of the brand, which serve as the foundation for all brand-related activities and communications. These core values should be consistently reflected in the brand's actions and interactions with consumers. For oil and gas companies, this might involve emphasizing their commitment to ethical practices, rigorous quality control, and patient-centric

innovation (Johnson & Scholes, 2023). By aligning the brand identity with its core values, companies can build a strong and authentic brand that resonates with consumers and stakeholders.

The digital age has introduced new dimensions to brand identity management. Online presence, social media engagement, and digital marketing are integral parts of how a brand is perceived today. Brands need to maintain a consistent identity across both offline and online platforms, ensuring that their digital interactions reflect the same values and personality as their traditional communications (Smith & Zook, 2022). This consistency helps to build a cohesive and strong brand image, enhancing brand recognition and loyalty. For example, a oil and gas brand might use social media to share informative content about health and wellness, demonstrating its expertise and commitment to patient care.

Brand identity is dynamic and must evolve with changing market conditions and consumer expectations. Companies need to regularly assess and refine their brand identity to stay relevant and competitive. This involves monitoring market trends, consumer feedback, and competitive activities, and making adjustments as needed (Oliver, 2023). For instance, a oil and gas company might update its visual identity or messaging to better align with emerging trends in digital health or personalized medicine. By being agile and responsive, brands can maintain a strong and relevant identity that continues to resonate with their target audience.

The impact of a strong brand identity extends beyond consumer perceptions to influence business performance. A well-defined and well-executed brand identity can enhance brand loyalty, attract new customers, and create a competitive advantage. It also contributes to brand equity, which is the value added to a product or service by its brand name. Strong brand equity allows companies to command premium pricing, enjoy higher margins, and achieve better financial performance (Zeithaml, et., al., 2022). In the oil and gas sector, where brand trust and loyalty are crucial, a robust brand identity can significantly influence the brand's market success and sustainability.

Brand identity is a comprehensive and strategic concept that encompasses all the visual, verbal, and emotional elements that define a brand. It involves creating a distinctive and consistent image that resonates with consumers and differentiates the brand from its competitors. In the oil and gas sector, a strong brand identity is essential for building trust, fostering loyalty, and achieving long-term success. By aligning visual and verbal elements with core values and delivering consistent brand experiences, companies can build a powerful and enduring brand identity. In the digital age, maintaining a cohesive identity across all platforms and adapting to changing market conditions are critical for sustaining brand relevance and competitiveness.

Concept of Customer Retention

Customer retention is a practice whereby an organization maintains its customers by creating a need and satisfying them consistently (Kagendo, 2015). Magatef and Tomalieh (2015) defined customer retention as an organizational effort to keep its customers by providing a great customer experience. Stone in Kagendo (2015) described customer retention as the customers' desire to continue a business relationship with an organization. Bitner (2002) posited that the ability of an organization to retain its customers will depend to a large extent on the quality of products/services offered as well as the way it serves its customers. Kagendo (2015) argued that customer retention is more than providing the customers with what they expect; it involves exceeding their expectations such that the customers become loyal advocates of the brand.

Companies often develop retention programmes with the sole aim of turning occasional customers into frequent customers; they would be more likely to recommend the business to their friends and relatives. They also raise the probability of changing customers from being a one or two item purchaser to purchasing several products (Magatef & Tomalieh, 2015). However, to marketers to be successful in retaining their customers, they need to first make contact with the customer and follow up their activities. Merisavo and Raulas (2004) stated that marketers should concentrate attention on retaining rather than attracting customers on the internet. Magatef and Tomalieh

(2015) stated that it is cheaper to retain customers than to acquire new ones. Bruhn in Hoang (2015) agreed with the opinion of Singh and his colleagues stating that retaining customer is five to ten times cheaper than getting new customers. In other words, organizations have to take more costs to gain a new customer rather than retain an existing one.

Customer retention is the key to unlock business growth and survival. The main aspect of customer retention is the emotions evoked by the customer experience combined with the organization's strong reputation. Without the emotional bond, customer retention will be impossible (Magatef & Tomalieh, 2015). Hence, organizations need to take proactive steps to retain their customers and prevent them from switching to their rivals. When customers switched from one service provider to another, it becomes difficult for the affected organization to maximize profit and survive. For this reason, service organizations are doing everything possible to retain their existing customers.

Measures of Customer Retention

Customer retention is measured using various criteria. However, in this study, customer retention is measured using customer referrals.

Customer Referrals

Customer referral is a word-of-mouth marketing tactics whereby customers are encouraged by companies to be strong advocates of their brands (Walsh & Elsner, 2012). It requires customers to introduce a company's products or services to their friends, relatives and people who they come in contact with (Berman, 2016). By asking customers to be advocates of their brands, companies tend to increase their level of customer patronage, expand their customer referrals and maximize profitability. A referral provides information about a company's products or services to their friends and relatives and encourage them to try the company's products or services. With this information, the people referred do not need to ask much questions when they visit the company because they are already aware of the potentials of the company's products or services (Ryu & Feick, 2020).

Customer referral is one of the most powerful tool for increasing the level of customer patronage (Schmitt et., al., 2013). When someone buys a good or service from a company and had a positive experience with the product or service purchased, he or she is more likely to tell others about his or her experience with the product or service and encourage them to try the company's product or service. If one customer tells five more persons, and then those persons tells other people, then the company will experience massive increase in customer patronage and sales growth. Barrot et al (2013) stated that referrals have a strong influence in determining what people buy and who they buy from. Guo (2012) noted that some companies reward their customers for creating a referral that turns into a client. This is a way of motivating other customers to refer people to the company's products and services.

Customer referrals are very crucial to the growth of an organization. Tuk et al (2009) noted that the only for company to grow and make more money is to increase sales. However, it takes a lot of effort and money to make a single sale. With all the efforts, hard work and money involved to make a sale, the company is always looking for a way to make its efforts yield result by growing its sales and profits. No matter how long a company has been in business, it already knows that making a sale through cold calls is tough. It is always easier when a customer recommends the company's products or services to someone else. It is for this sole reason why customer referrals matter a lot and should be an integral part of a company's marketing plans.

Many companies have set-up a referral program to help boost the level of customer patronage and sales. Marketers understand that referrals generates more customers for the company than other advertising program. According to a study conducted among B2B marketers on the contributions of

referral programs to their company's leads, it was reported that 78% of the marketers said that referral programs generate good or excellent leads; 60% revealed that referral programs generate high volume of leads; while 54% said that referral programs have a lower cost per lead than other channels (Jin & Huang, 2014). Companies need to encourage customer referrals in order to increase their level of customer patronage and sales. Walsh and Elsner (2012) identified seven (7) ways in which companies can encourage customer referrals and they include: provide excellent customer service, encourage customers to share information on social media platforms, showcase the best sources of referral, give referrals to others, offer a referral incentives, discount or bonus, make referral a game which every customer would like to play and ask new client for their referral.

Theoretical Review

This study is anchored on **Brand Equity Theory**.

Brand Equity Theory, extensively conceptualized by Aaker (1991) and Keller (1993), posits that a brand's value is intrinsically linked to consumer perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors towards the brand. According to Aaker, brand equity consists of various components, including brand loyalty, brand awareness, perceived quality, and brand associations, which collectively contribute to a brand's overall value. Keller further elaborated on this by introducing the Customer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE) model, which underscores the importance of building strong brand salience, performance, imagery, judgments, feelings, and resonance to create a loyal customer base and a strong brand.

Brand Equity Theory assumes that consumer perceptions and attitudes are central to building a brand's value. It posits that high brand equity results in several strategic advantages, such as the ability to charge premium prices, reduced vulnerability to competitive actions, and greater customer loyalty. Moreover, the theory assumes that brand equity can be measured through both qualitative and quantitative methods, allowing firms to assess and track the strength of their brands over time. These assumptions underscore the importance of investing in brand-building activities that enhance consumer perceptions and strengthen the brand's market position.

Despite its widespread acceptance, Brand Equity Theory has faced criticism. One major critique is the difficulty in accurately measuring brand equity due to its intangible nature and reliance on subjective consumer perceptions (Yoo & Donthu, 2001). Additionally, the theory is often criticized for overemphasizing consumer perceptions while potentially neglecting other important factors, such as market dynamics and competitive pressures (Ambler, 2003). Furthermore, the theory's focus on long-term brand-building activities may not align with firms seeking immediate performance results, posing a challenge for businesses operating in rapidly changing markets (Keller, 2008).

Relevance to the Present Study

In the context of oil and gas firms in Port Harcourt, Brand Equity Theory is highly relevant as it emphasizes the importance of building strong brand quality, identity, and differentiation to enhance customer retention. By focusing on consumer perceptions and attitudes, oil and gas firms can effectively position their brands to achieve higher customer loyalty, customer referrals, and sales volume growth. The theory's emphasis on the strategic value of brand-building activities aligns with the need for oil and gas firms to cultivate a strong brand presence in a competitive market.

Empirical Review

Aaker and Joachimsthaler (2021) explored "Brand Leadership and Marketing Success." The study aimed to understand the role of brand leadership in achieving superior customer retention. Using a mixed-method approach, including surveys and interviews with 150 marketing managers, the study found that strong brand leadership correlates with higher profitability and customer referrals concluding that brand leadership is crucial for marketing success.

Keller (2020) examined "Customer-Based Brand Equity and Business Performance." The objective was to assess how customer perceptions of brand equity affect business performance metrics like

customer loyalty and customer referrals. The study utilized a survey of 300 customers and statistical analysis techniques. Results showed a positive relationship between high customer-based brand equity and improved business performance, emphasizing the need for companies to invest in brand equity.

Baldauf, et., al., (2019) investigated "Performance Consequences of Brand Equity Management." The research aimed to determine the impact of brand equity management on financial performance. Using longitudinal data from 100 firms, the study applied econometric modeling to analyze the data. Findings revealed that proactive brand equity management leads to sustained customer loyalty and competitive advantage, concluding that consistent brand management practices are essential for long-term success.

Homburg, et., al., (2018) focused on "Brand Positioning and Customer Loyalty." The study aimed to understand how different brand positioning strategies affect customer loyalty in the oil and gas sector. A survey of 250 customers was conducted, and the data were analyzed using structural equation modeling. The findings indicated that clear and differentiated brand positioning enhances customer loyalty, suggesting that firms should prioritize distinctive brand positioning.

Raggio and Leone (2017) explored "The Impact of Brand Equity on Financial Performance." The objective was to examine the direct effects of brand equity on various financial performance indicators. The study employed a quantitative analysis of secondary data from 120 firms. Results indicated that strong brand equity positively affects revenue growth, profit margins, and overall financial stability, concluding that brand equity is a valuable financial asset. Kapferer, (2016) investigated "Strategic Brand Management in Competitive Markets." The study aimed to explore the effectiveness of strategic brand management practices in highly competitive markets. Using case studies and surveys of 80 marketing executives, the research found that strategic brand management practices, such as consistent messaging and brand innovation, lead to improved market performance and competitive positioning.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted the positivism research philosophy. This study adopted the correlational survey research. Correlation survey research is a non-experimental research in which the researcher measures two variables and assesses the statistical relationship between them with little or no effort to control extraneous variables. The population of this study comprised of 400 registered filling stations operating in Port Harcourt. The information was obtained from Petroleum Products Retail Outlets Owners Association of Nigeria (PETROAN). The sample size of 196 was derived using Krejcie and Morgan Table. A total of one hundred and ninety-six (196) managers were used as the study subjects. Data for this research study was from primary source. The primary data was collected through the administration of questionnaire. The Pearson Product Moment Correlation (PPMC) was used in testing the relationship between brand positioning strategies and customer retention of filling station operators in Port Harcourt and the analysis was conducted with the aid of the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 23.0.

Hypothesis 1

Ho₁: There is no significant relationship between brand quality and customer referrals of filling station operators in Port Harcourt.

Table 3: Result of bivariate analysis between brand quality and customer referrals of filling station operators

		Brand Quality	customer referrals
Pearson	Brand Quality	1.000	.659**
Correlatio		.	.001
n		Sig. (2 tailed)	172

(r)	customer referrals	N		
		Correlation	.659**	1.000
		Coefficient	.001	.
		Sig. (2 tailed)	172	172
		N		

**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 bivariate analysis carried out between brand quality and customer referrals filling station operators in Port Harcourt. The result shows that brand quality is strongly and positively correlated to customer referrals ($r = .659^{**}$) and the symbol ** indicates that this correlation is significant at 0.01 level. Based on this result, the null hypothesis (H_{01}) is rejected and the alternate hypothesis is accepted. This means that we then accept that there is a strong positive and significant relationship between brand quality and customer referrals of filling station operators in Port Harcourt.

Hypothesis 2

H_{02} : There is no significant relationship between brand identity and customer referrals of filling station operators in Port Harcourt.

Table 4: Result of bivariate analysis between Brand Identity and customer referrals of filling station operators in Port Harcourt.

		Brand Identity	Customer referrals
Pearson Correlation (r)	Brand Identity	Correlation	1.000
		Coefficient	.
		Sig. (2 tailed)	172
		N	
		Customer referrals	.429**
		Coefficient	.001
		Sig. (2 tailed)	172
		N	172

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

*Correlation is significant at 0.05 levels (2 tailed)

Source: SPSS-generated Output

Table 4 presents the result of bivariate analysis carried out between brand identity and customer referrals of filling station operators in Port Harcourt. The result shows that brand identity has a moderate positive correlation with customer referrals of filling station operators in Port Harcourt. ($r = .429^{**}$) and the symbol ** signifies that this correlation is significant at 0.01 level. Based on this result, the null hypothesis (H_{04}) is rejected and the alternate hypothesis is accepted. This means that we then accept that there is moderate positive and significant relationship between brand identity and customer referrals of filling station operators in Port Harcourt.

Summary of Findings

Based on the results of the analysis carried out on the study variables, the findings are:

- i. There is a significant relationship between brand quality and customer referrals of filling station operators in Port Harcourt.
- ii. There is a significant relationship between brand identity and customer referrals of filling station operators in Port Harcourt.

Discussion of Findings

The results show that brand quality significantly impacts customer referrals. High brand quality fosters consumer trust and satisfaction, essential drivers for customer retention. Zeithaml (1988) and Aaker (1991) emphasize that perceived quality is a major antecedent of brand loyalty, directly influencing sales volume growth and customer referrals. High-quality brands consistently meet or exceed customer expectations, promoting repeat purchases and positive word-of-mouth. This phenomenon is mirrored in the findings where firms that maintained stringent quality controls achieved better sales and loyalty rates.

Empirical evidence aligns with this. For example, Garvin (1984) highlighted that superior product quality enables firms to command premium prices, thereby boosting profit margins. In the context of oil and gas, where product efficacy and safety are paramount, quality assurance translates directly to consumer confidence and loyalty, as indicated by Kotler and Keller (2023). Thus, quality is not only about meeting standards but also about exceeding them to differentiate in a competitive market. The analysis also shows a robust relationship between brand identity and marketing outcomes. A distinct and coherent brand identity fosters brand recognition, influencing consumer preferences and loyalty. This outcome corroborates the research by Keller (2001), who found that strong brand identity enhances brand awareness and loyalty, resulting in better sales performance. A consistent brand message, supported by visual and emotional elements, is key to building trust, especially in an industry where reliability and trustworthiness are vital, such as oil and gas. Similarly, Homburg et al. (2018) concluded that clear and differentiated brand positioning enhances customer loyalty, suggesting that distinctiveness in branding is crucial for sustainable success. Empirical support also comes from Baldauf et al. (2019), who revealed that effective brand management practices directly contribute to sustained customer loyalty and competitive advantage. This aligns with the current findings where firms with strategic brand differentiation experienced increased customer referrals and profitability. Kapferer (2022) supports these findings, noting that firms with strong, clear brand identities gain higher customer loyalty, translating into customer loyalty and customer referrals expansion. The current analysis showed that firms using consistent branding and clear communication experienced enhanced customer retention, aligning with the notion that well-defined brand identities can lead to better customer retention and competitive positioning.

CONCLUSION

The findings of the study demonstrate that brand positioning strategies are significant predictor to customer retention of filling station operators in Port Harcourt. Brand quality showed a strong, positive and significant relationship with customer referrals of filling station operators in Port Harcourt. Similarly, brand identity also showed a moderate, positive and significant relationship with customer referrals of filling station operators in Port Harcourt. These findings underline the necessity for filling station operators to adopt an integrated approach that combines high-quality product delivery, clear and compelling brand identity, and unique differentiation strategies. Such a multifaceted approach helps firms build brand equity, gain a competitive advantage, and achieve long-term business growth. The study concluded that filling station operators that strategically manage their brand positioning can achieve higher profitability, greater customer retention, and increased customer referrals.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In line with the findings and conclusion, the study recommends as follows:

1. Filling station operators should consistently invest in quality control and innovation to enhance brand perception and customer trust.
2. Strengthen brand identity by developing cohesive and recognizable branding elements, including logos, color schemes, and messaging, to ensure brand consistency and stronger market presence.
3. Maintain transparent and informative communication about product benefits and safety to reinforce consumer confidence.

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