PRODUCT ASSORTMENT AND CUSTOMER PATRONAGE OF FILLING STATIONS IN YENAGOA, BAYELSA STATE

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A B S T R A C T	K E Y W O R D S
The aim of this research work was to empirically investigate the relationship between product assortment and customer patronage of filling stations in Yenagoa, Bayelsa State. This study employed the cross-sectional survey research design. The researcher made use of 300 customers from 20 accessible filling stations that patronize filling stations in Yenagoa, Bayelsa State that were accessible to the researcher. Spearman Rank Correlation Coefficient was used to test the four hypotheses. This result indicated that there is a significant relationship between product assortment and customer patronage of filling stations in Yenagoa, Bayelsa State. The researcher therefore recommended that managers of filling stations in Yenagoa, Bayelsa State are encouraged to treat product width as an essential marketing strategy that should, as a matter of policy, be better managed for sustainable customer patronage and profitability.	Product Assortment. Repeat Purchase. Customer referral. Customer Patronage.

Introduction

The increasing rate of filling stations across Yenagoa, the Bayelsa State capital has prompted scholars to research on better strategies that when adopted might improve organizational competitiveness among filling stations. The Nigeria's oil sector (also known as the downstream) is highly controlled sector in Nigeria (Ibanga, 2009; Sanusi, 2011; Wogu, 2011; Sokubi, 2011; Ogwo & Onuoha, 2013). The downstream involves participants or activities engaged in ensuring the availability of petroleum products from refineries and import points to the end users (Okpara & Anyanwu, 2006). The argument for total deregulation of the downstream has lingered for a very long time but the government is still the highest decision-maker as long as marketing of petroleum products in Nigeria is concerned, including allocation, pricing and distribution of these products. This development has practically made competition, especially based on marketing's 4Ps – product, price, promotion and place to be old-fashioned for the downstream, as they offer products without clear brand identity and loyalty, sold at

uniform prices which none of them can justify a unilateral change in the prices, physically or psychologically (Okpara & Anyanwu, 2006), in promotion.

Nigeria has over 26,000 petroleum retail stations often called filling stations (PPPRA, 2006), owned by three operators that dominate the industries. These are the major marketers, the independent marketers and the NNPC. Six major marketers (Oando, Nig. Plc, Mobil Oil Nig. Plc, Total Nig. Plc, Forte Oil Nig. Plc, MRS Nig. Plc, and Conoil Plc) controls 25.47% share of the fuels retail market; over 3800 Independent Marketers control 51% of the fuels retail market; while the NNPC controls only 23.43% of the retail market (Ambituuni, Amezaga & Emeseh, 2014).

Customers have diverse motivations, taste and preferences, and that is why business organizations constantly seek solutions to the customers various state of deprivation (needs) through product offerings, thus consumers consider various features of a service outlet in expressing their purchase intention (Ogbuji, Onuoha, & Abdul, 2016). Today's customers of retail outlets no longer based their purchase decisions only on product functions, features or attributes. They now seek for additional beneficial elements which have considerable influence on where they make their purchases; thus making retail competitive advantage to go beyond product, price, promotion and place (Baker et al 2003). One of such additional influential elements on customers' patronage of retail outlets, especially in filling stations is store layout.

Customer patronage encapsulates the degree to which a consumer returns to a store and makes repeated purchases. If a store can maintain high Customer patronage, it will be able to generate a large share of the consumer spending (Hu & Jasper, 2006; Pan & Zinkhan, 2006; Theodoridis & Chatzipanagiotou, 2009). Store image is defined as the manner in which a consumer views a business. Therefore, a business can attract new customers by creating a store image that is in line with or surpasses the expectations of the consumer (Hu & Jasper, 2006; Pan & Zinkhan, 2006). It is by combining Customer patronage with store image that a business can create a growing and loyal consumer base.

Several authors and researchers, including Onuoha, & Doris (2017), Seock & Lee, (2013), and Ogbuji, Onuoha, & Abdul, (2016) has provide accessible literature in the investigation of product assortment and its convinced influence of customer patronage in the downstream sector. Hence this study intends to fill these gaps and contribute to the existing literature on these specific issues by presenting a high-quality investigation that evaluates product assortment and its direct influence on customer patronage of filling stations in Yenagoa, Bayelsa State. This marks our point of departure as this study aims at establishing relationships among the dimensions of product assortment used in this study and customer patronage of filling stations in Yenagoa, Bayelsa State, Nigeria.

Statement of the Problem

Filling stations significantly contribute to traffic problems such as traffic congestion, pollution, fire and explosion in most Nigerian urban settlements (Ayodele, 2011). This is ultimately a consequence of the lack of development control and non-conformity with planning standards in semi–urban and fully urbanized settlements. The planning twists are expressed in poor sitting, inadequate size, limited set back from road, poor radius allowance from major facilities like schools, churches, and mosques. This culminates in environmental dis-amenities such as traffic congestion, pollution, fire and many more problems resulting from uncoordinated development.

It has been observed that the study area is a developing urban center, which on account of its expansion had also witnessed the proliferation of petrol filling stations, most of which are poorly sited, and

essentially disregard planning standards. The imperativeness of this study is also borne out of the non-existence of spatial data in respect of petrol filling station in the area as no study has been done in this regard. Marketers of petroleum products in Yenagoa, Bayelsa State, were also recently warned by the DPR against sale of adulterated products. Handing down the warning at a meeting between marketers of the products and Directorate of Petroleum Product, DPR, the latter said it had noted the tendency on the part of marketers to make high profit through sale of adulterated products and adjustment of pumps prices(NAN, 2015). It is because of these issues that motorist no longer repeatedly purchase petroleum products from one particular filling station.

Aim and Objectives of the Study

The aim of this research work is to empirically investigate the relationship between product assortment and customer patronage of filling stations in Yenagoa, Bayelsa State. However, the specific objectives are to;

i. Determine the relationship between product width and customer patronage of filling stations in Yenagoa, Bayelsa State.
ii. Ascertain empirically the relationship between product depth and customer patronage of filling stations in Yenagoa, Bayelsa State.

Research Questions

The following listed below are some of the possible research questions which this study aims to proffer solutions to;

i. What is the significant relationship between product width and customer patronage of filling stations in Yenagoa, Bayelsa State?
ii. What is the significant relationship between product depth and customer patronage of filling stations in Yenagoa, Bayelsa State?

Research Hypothesis

H_{01}: There is no significant relationship between product width and customer patronage of filling stations in Yenagoa, Bayelsa State.
H_{02}: There is no significant relationship between product depth and customer patronage of filling stations in Yenagoa, Bayelsa State.

Review of Related Literature

Theoretical Foundation: the theory underpinning this study is the retail accordion theory. The extent to which some retailers have pursued diversification and specialization assortment strategies was originally observed by Hower (1943) and developed by Hollander (1966) in relation to the accordion theory. Hollander noted a number of factors that encouraged specialization, using the orchestra analogy whereby 'at any one moment some players are retiring from the orchestra while others (mainly with compressed instruments) are joining the band'. Furthermore, he identified three phenomena occurring in the process of specialization: unsuccessful merchandise mixes which have encountered 'insurmountable limitations', the deletion of conventional lines from the retail assortment and the market growth of a product area being adopted by new specialists. These phenomena have also been observed in the 1980s and 1990s (McGoldrick 1990; Brown 1988).

Product Assortment

Product assortment is a critical element of store layout as it provides customers with the breadth and depth of product they want under one roof. A good product assortment entices customers to move within the store which could lead them to purchase more merchandize than may have planned originally (Levy & Weitz, 2007). Stores that carry large assortments of products are often preferred by consumers for several reasons, including matching of specifications, convenience, ease of shopping and flexibility (Boatwright & Nune, 2001). Diverse consumer interest in product selection is noted to have been resolved through large assortment (Inman, 2001). A key supposition has been that offering buyers a variety of product options is better than offering them limited choices; expressing that greater variety gives consumers maximum freedom to select products that meet their tastes and preferences (Berger, Draganska & Simonson, 2007).

Again, extant literature posits that larger assortment can sometimes make consumers confused and even frustrated (Chernev, 2003). Therefore, retail owners must be careful to stock only those products that meet consumer needs and capable of rousing purchase attention (Asuquo & Igbongidi, 2015; Elmaraghy, et al., 2013). A wider range of assortment could possibly lead to the satisfaction of different tastes, and an increase in brand choices will ultimately create a plethora of potentials in so many areas; including market expansion, higher sales volume and an upward shift in company revenue (Berger et al., 2007). However, these can only be achieved if assortment is properly managed (ElMaraghyet al., 2013).

Product assortment is the most critical decision facing retailers in terms of product variety with reference to price range, selection (depth and breadth), attributes, stock-out or delivery issues and consumer relevance that are the key driver of consumers' purchase intentions and retailer profitability (Eroglu et al., 2011; Kahn, 2017; Mosteller et al., 2014). Finch (2007) termed it "product risk" in relation to ambiguity about the product description and price in an online environment. In addition, the expansion and consolidation of online retailing have hosted different levels of operational flexibility challenges (Audrain-Pontevia et al., 2013; Richey et al., 2012), and access to detailed transaction information (Bauer et al., 2006). Pascoe et al. (2017) acclaimed that consumers' involvement with a retail brand is positively related to effective website aesthetics and online communications performance.

Customer Patronage

Patronage is desire driven base on the perception of service/product quality or qualities (Adiele, Grend, & Ezirim, 2015). They added that the perception of the physical environment (service settings) and the resulting feelings of the customer/consumer in respect to his/her self-concept define patronage. Customer patronage is defined as choice behavior that represents an individual's preference for a particular store for purchasing product. Pan and Zinkhan (2006) identify two dimensions of customer patronage, namely, store choice (a customer's choice to patronize a particular store) and frequency of visit (how often a shopper patronizes that store), and went on to define customer patronage as the measures that show the degree to which a customer makes his/her purchases either from a particular marketer or at a particular outlet in relation to competitors. Customer patronage is the combination of attitude, normative beliefs, and motivations that will influence purchasing behavior (Fishbein and Ajzen, 1975). Nwulu & Asiegbu (2015) described patronage as material assistance and encouragement given to a patron, which could also be called customer in an exchange relationship.

Nwulu & Asiegbu (2015), patronage is the act of regularly buying from a seller or business outlet. Customer patronage could only be sustained by offering a need satisfying product/service in a competitive business arena (Sulek & Hensley, 2004). Customer patronage is a mixed of psychological variables that determine purchase behaviour (Onuoha & Nnenanya 2017). Psychological factors are prime to consumers (Moye & Giddings, 2002), and serves as a pointer to which brand of product/service to patronize by a consumer (Ogbuji et al., 2016).

According to Baker et al. (2002), willingness of customers to shop longer in store, deliver good word-of-mouth for the store, and repurchase from the store made up patronage in retailing industry. Grewal et al. (2003) opined that retailers might influence customer patronage decisions through several factors such as having a desirable assortment of products at customers' preferred place and time, at a reasonable price. The decision to patronize a store usually starts with a set of characteristics or attributes that consumers consider important, which include price, quality, variety of merchandize, credit availability, return policies, and well known label/brand (Moye, 2000). Other factors like lighting, traffic flow, walking space, products display, music, and cleanliness also have influence on customers' store choice (Grewal et al., 2003).

Relationship between Product Assortment and Customer Patronage

Effective merchandising strategies can reap big rewards in today's marketplace. Effective category management is essential for retailing. It is critical that stores improve their service by providing customers with the products they want, in a position that is sensible and simple to find. Taking a more strategic approach to merchandising can reap big rewards by boosting sales, increasing footfall and ultimately increasing turnover. Levy and Weitz (2007) found that a good merchandise assortment should entice customers to move around the store to purchase more merchandise than they may have planned originally. One method is to expose customers to a layout that facilitates a specific traffic pattern. Another method of helping customers move through the store is to provide variety; the store should be filled with little nooks and crannies that entice shoppers to wander around. A good layout should provide a balance between giving customers adequate space in which to shop. The breadth and depth of the assortment in a merchandise category can affect the retailers brand image. In general, retailers need to display their merchandise effectively in order to satisfy the customers need and maintain their brand image with respect to merchandise category. There is a belief that customers actually buy more if there are improvements in assortment.

Findings reveal that consumer's perceptions of the assortment range stems from the combination of few indicators, mainly the number of stock-keeping units proposed and the availability of the favorite brands. Findings further demonstrate that consumers" evaluation of the overall store assortment draws on the perceived choice within the product categories where they are highly sensitive to the assortment range. For convenience stores to reach their prime goal of building an efficient assortment, retailers need, besides increasing the outlets cost-efficiency, to evaluate shoppers assortment perceptions so that what the store actually offers can be tailored to meet customers' needs and expectations (Amine and Cadenat, 2003). Boatwright and Nunes (2001) contend that most retailers realize that consumers often prefer stores that carry large assortments of products for several reasons. For one, the larger the selection, the more likely consumers are to find a product that matches their exact specifications.

In addition, more products mean more flexibility, which is important if the consumer has uncertain preferences. Moreover, recent research suggests that consumer choice is affected by the perception of

variety among a selection which depends on more than just the number of distinct products on the shelves. The consumer's perception of variety can be influenced by the space devoted to the category, the presence or absence of the consumer's favorite item, the arrangement of an assortment and the repetition of items, and the number of acceptable alternatives. Therefore, many observers in industry and academia believe that, if retailers plan merchandise assortment properly, consumers can make a sizeable contribution to the overall retail sales. Halepete et al. (2005) identify that, in the past, when competition was less intense, a store could target a wide range of customers. However, retailing trends indicate that it is becoming more important to satisfy customers' needs. Moreover, assortment planning is one of the most important factors in merchandising. In general, the assortment of products depends on store location, store size, and the lifestyle of the local consumers. Miranda et al. (2005) further support the argument that increased rates of customer retention leads to increased profitability. The strength of allegiance or loyalty of customers to a store is an important indicator of store health. In fact, a study of retailing in the United Kingdom highlighted the importance of developing a corporate retail strategy to manage customer loyalty and prevent shoppers from switching stores. Store satisfaction is a necessary condition for achieving store loyalty. Miranda et al. (2005) further indicate that a number of store image studies identified a link between the store attributes and store loyalty.

Methodology

Consequently, this study will employ the cross-sectional survey research design. Therefore in this study, the researcher made use of 300 customers from 20 accessible filling stations that patronize filling stations in Yenagoa, Bayelsa State that were accessible to the researcher. The data for this study were obtained from two major sources which are primary and secondary sources. For this study, primary data will be collected using structured questionnaire, while secondary data sources will include journals, textbooks, and the internet. Spearman rank correlation coefficient was used to test the hypotheses raised in this study. This tool will be adopted because it seeks to show the level of the relationship existing between the independent and dependent variables. The analysis will be done with the help of SPSS, version 23. The choice of this technique was prompted by the ordinal nature of the information sought through the use of questionnaire.

Data Analysis and Results

We provide and evaluate empirical data acquired by a questionnaire survey in this section. We also look at the consistency of the data. Following that, the computation of the correlation between measures of ease-of-retrieval and automated judgment input will be provided and examined, followed by the presentation and analysis of hypothesis testing, which will decide if the study's hypotheses are accepted or rejected.

H_{01}: There is no significant relationship between product width and customer patronage of filling stations in Yenagoa, Bayelsa State.

Table 1: Correlation Analysis showing the relationship between of the product width and customer patronage

Correlations

		product width	customer patronage
Spearman's rho	**product width** Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.734
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.000
	N	300	300
	customer patronage Correlation Coefficient	. 734	1.000
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.
	N	300	300

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).
Source: SPSS Output, 2023

Decision: Table 1 above reveals a Spearman Rank Correlation Coefficient of 0.734 and probability value of 0.000 on the relationship between product width and customer patronage of filling stations in Yenagoa, Bayelsa State. This result indicates that there is a significant relationship between product width and customer patronage of filling stations in Yenagoa, Bayelsa State. Therefore, we reject the null hypothesis and accept the alternate hypotheses, because the PV (0.001) <0.05 level of significance.

H$_{02}$: There is no significant relationship between product depth and customer patronage of filling stations in Yenagoa, Bayelsa State.

Table 2: Correlation Analysis showing the relationship between of product depth and customer patronage

Correlations

		product depth	customer patronage
Spearman's rho	**product depth** Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.878
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.000
	N	300	300
	customer patronage Correlation Coefficient	. 878	1.000
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.
	N	300	300

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).
Source: SPSS 23 Output, 2023

Decision: Table 2 above reveals a Spearman Rank Correlation Coefficient of 0.878 and probability value of 0.000 on the relationship between product depth of and customer patronage of filling stations in Yenagoa, Bayelsa State. This result indicates that there is a moderate but positive significant relationship between product depth and customer patronage of of filling stations in Yenagoa, Bayelsa

State. Therefore, we reject the null hypothesis and accept the alternate hypotheses, because the PV (0.001) <0.05 level of significance.

Discussion and Conclusion

Hypotheses (H01) and (H02) aimed at examining the significant relationship between product assortment and customer patronage of filling stations in Yenagoa, Bayelsa State. The hypothesis was tested using Spearman Rank Correlation Coefficient analysis. Our analysis revealed a significant relationship between product width and customer patronage of filling stations in Yenagoa, Bayelsa State (Rho= 0.734). Hypothesis two also revealed a positively significant relationship between product depth and customer patronage of filling stations in Yenagoa, Bayelsa State (Rho= 0.878). That is to say, product depth has a positive relationship with customer patronage. This result supported the works of Levy and Weitz (2007); Halepete et al. (2005); Miranda et al. (2005).

Recommendations

The researcher therefore recommends that;

i. Managers of filling stations in Yenagoa, Bayelsa State are encouraged to treat product width as an essential marketing strategy that should, as a matter of policy, be better managed for sustainable customer patronage and profitability.

ii. Managers' of filling stations in Yenagoa, Bayelsa State should continuously improve their product depth in other to increase customer patronage.

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