"Relationship marketing and loyalty of mobile phone customers"

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RELATIONSHIP MARKETING AND LOYALTY OF MOBILE PHONE CUSTOMERS

Abstract

The purpose of this study is to critically examine the effect of relationship marketing (such as trust, commitment, communication effectiveness, and conflict handling) on customer loyalty in the telecommunication service delivery sector. The data for this study were gathered through a questionnaire. In addition, a survey of two hundred and twenty-five (225) customers of telecommunication services in Nigeria supports the investigation. The Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 22 was employed to analyze the data gathered. The findings of this study show that trust, commitment, communication effectiveness, and conflict handling directly affect customer loyalty. In addition, all four variables directly influence customer loyalty. Hinging on the study's discoveries, the paper suggested that organizations should strategically implement relationship marketing as this will help build and increase loyal customers. This study contributes to the body of knowledge in this field, which adds significant value. Moreover, the study provides valuable details on the telecommunication sector, possibly new to many readers.

Keywords	attitudinal, behavioral, switching restraints, trust, commitment, communication, conflict handling
JEL Classification	M30, M31

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, telecommunication companies have witnessed an enormous rise in competition due to the ease of porting to another network when customers are not satisfied. This development raises a situation of the continuous battle for customers and increases the need to build better firm-client relationships (Ndubisi, 2007). The sustainability of any competing organization hinges on the organization's ability to attract fresh customers and retain the current ones because, without customers, an organization cannot experience productivity, growth, and sustainability. Thus, managers should not just search for fresh customers but significantly put measures in place to retain current customers. According to Kotler and Keller (2009), the main reason organizations emphasize the preservation of existing customers is based on the proposition that maintaining the current customer is more cost-efficient than looking for fresh ones.

Sujansky and Ferri-Reed (2009) posit that organizations spend, on average, five times more to fascinate new customers when compared to meeting the needs of current customers. Morgan and Hunt (1994) asserted that loyal customers are not easily persuaded to leave the organization to its competitors. Meanwhile, customer loyalty has potential growth because of its influence in creating a sustainable competitive advantage for organizations. Studies on the effect of customer loyalty in the telecommunication sector in other nations, for instance, Germany, South Korea, and France,

have looked at network quality, the number of complaints, and pricing, respectively (Ahn et al., 2006; Zhang et al., 2021; Lee et al., 2001). Nevertheless, extant research has focused on the importance of relationship marketing in other sectors like healthcare (Baashar et al., 2016), banking (Dimitriadis, 2010), tourism (Ozgener & Iraz, 2006), transport (Cheng et al., 2008), and hotel (Lo et al., 2010). However, few studies exist on the influence of relationship marketing on customer loyalty in the telecommunication sector of Nigeria.

Managers have considered relationship marketing vital to build customer loyalty and lessen the propensity of consumers to move to competitors. Sharifi and Esfidani (2014) opined that organizations need to surpass their clients' desires to fulfill, hold, and build up a good relationship with them. Raza and Rehman (2012) stated that relationship marketing aids marketers and decision-makers in making defined decisions that will increase customer loyalty. Ndubisi et al. (2008) said that organizations are capitalizing on solid firm-client relationships to generate valuable insight on satisfying customers better and ensuring they do not switch to their competitors.

Furthermore, the competitive trend in the telecommunication industry of Nigeria and relationship-marketing strategies create mutual returns, which will benefit both the customer and the organization. Thus, the motivation of the study is concentrated on linking the current gap by examining the influence of the variables of relationship marketing (such as trust, communication effectiveness, conflict handling, and commitment) on the variables of customer loyalty (such as attitudinal, behavioral, and switching restraints).

1. LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESIS

Morgan and Hunt (1994) conceptualized relationship marketing as "all marketing actions coordinated toward setting up, creating, and maintaining effective rational exchanges." According to Mudie and Pirrie (2006), relationship marketing can be seen as a philosophy that patterns how businesses are done, a critical introduction that concentrates on protecting and enhancing existing clients instead of obtaining new customers. In addition, relationship marketing implies creating customers and making them partners, which makes this approach unique from the traditional exchange (Bowen & Shoemaker, 2003).

Relationship marketing exploits the era of significant worth for a particular customer and endeavors to start and keep up a long-term based rapport with him/her to improve the outcomes of service acquired by the customers (Gounaris et al., 2010). Furthermore, it inspires the post-purchase message of positive brands of an organization among customers, who consequently suggest these brands to prospective customers, which invariably affect future purchasing decisions (Wongsansukcharoen, 2022).

The American Marketing Association (AMA) defines relationship marketing as "the kind of marketing that its goal is developing and managing long-term and trustworthy relationships with customers, suppliers and all others acting in the market" (Gilaninia et al., 2011). Customers are seen as the main feature during the company planning methods or procedures in relationship marketing (Sharifi & Esfidani, 2014). Hougaard and Bjerre (2002) also characterized relationship marketing as the firm's conduct to build up and maintain a gainful relationship with their customers for the advantage of both sides. Appropriate relationship marketing can bring about lower costs of marketing and client dedication and potentially expand customer retention for telecommunication firms (Bergeron & Roy, 2008).

However, the most crucial goal is to improve consumer loyalty. Customer loyalty is an assurance that customers repeat purchases frequently (Peelen, 2005). Relationship marketing has risen throughout the years as one exciting part of marketing that centers on building long-lasting connections between organizations and their customers.

1.1. Customer loyalty

In marketing, customer loyalty is a "deeply held commitment to re-buy or re-patronize a preferred

product/service consistently in the future, thereby, causing same repetitive brand set purchasing, despite situational influences and marketing efforts having the potential to cause switching behavior" (Oliver, 1999, p. 34). Customer loyalty implies that a consumer is dedicated to the organization and simply bends to a rival in exceptional circumstances (Patro & Kamakula, 2018). Customer loyalty is not regarded permanent because customers may observe that competitors offer better value, thereby reducing their weight for the present organization (Ogunnaike et al., 2014).

According to Zhou et al. (2021), honest loyalty subsists when there is an immersion in the acquisition and an obligation to the organization's brand. Herhausen et al. (2019) also posited that brand loyalty deserves earnest reflection when making sensible decisions after assessing competing products; an obligation is subsequently given to a brand.

Customer loyalty is more than behavior and encompasses occurrences such as taste, preference, desire, and potential to patronize the company (Worlu et al., 2016). In service marketing, consumer loyalty can be seen as a fixed attitude and relationship established by a customer toward the provider of service, which is centered on long-term collaboration, strength, robustness, and agreement of service conditions (Kozlenkova et al., 2017). Loyalty can be illustrated as a solid dedication to repurchasing or frequently buying a best-suit product/service in subsequent times. Customer loyalty can be accomplished by recognizing the customer's basic needs and controlling them by making them fulfilled (Lee et al., 2018). The merger of clients' attitudinal, behavioral, and repeat patronage features can also be considered.

Customer loyalty has been critical and has raised many rivals due to customers' high expectations. Customers who show a high loyalty level to its service can re-buy certain products and are willing to spend more cash. In this manner, loyal customers encourage businesses to make expenses lower than competitors to attract more clients.

1.2. Keystones of relationship marketing and customer loyalty

Marketing scholars have theorized important features that anchor relationship marketing: trust,

communication effectiveness, conflict handling, and commitment (Li et al., 2020; Ndubisi & Wah, 2005; Dwyer et al., 1987). This study has connected these keystones of relationship marketing to customer loyalty. Trust is considered the first part of relationship marketing, and more attention is given to trust by different authors (Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Buttle, 2009). Trust is the most significant part of relationship marketing (Paparoidamis et al., 2019).

According to Moorman et al. (1993), trust is "a willingness to rely on an exchange partner in whom one has confidence." Morgan and Hunt (1994) assert that it is vital to get customers' trust. Mosavi and Ghaedi (2012) found a direct association between trust and customers' loyalty. In service marketing, trust is a belief presumed by consumers that the provider will deliver the service that satisfies their needs (Nastasoiu & Vandenbosch, 2019). Trust is when a party has assurance in the integrity and steadfastness of its partner. Trust is a significant intervening component that guides the consumer before, during, and after service patronage, influencing loyalty and intensifying the connection between customers and the organization (Singh & Sirdeshmukh, 2000). Like loyalty, trust is a distinct emotional state in specific relationships (Bi, 2019).

When customers trust an organization, they have confidence in the quality of service offered and are more likely to be loyal to the organization. Reichheld and Schefter (2000) posited that customer trust is a precursor to customer loyalty. Customer loyalty subsequently revolved around attitudinal evaluation tools (Jones & Sasser, 1995). Meanwhile, attitudinal loyalty emphasizes individuals' emotional state, which inclines toward a given product or service (Fournier & Yao, 1997). Commitment is a significant component of long-lasting relationship marketing, and it is seen as an indispensable tool for determining the loyalty of customers (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). Commitment can be expressed as the obligation in buyer and seller relationships.

Egan (2001) proposes that commitment can be vital and essential to studying relationship marketing. Commitment guarantees connection between social associates (Gundlach et al., 1995).

Gomez et al. (2004) posit that commitment can be seen as an individual party's affection toward another party in a condition. To the core definition, commitment is an approach to the act of sustaining a connection with a partner. In addition, Conway and Swift (2000) discovered that the degree of commitment an individual senses or feels toward a particular relationship is also significant in building customer loyalty. Behavioral loyalty is simply about the repeat purchase by customers of a particular organization or brand, hence recognized as brand loyalty (Dick & Basu, 1994; Iyiola et al., 2018). Communication concerns the firm's ability to provide timely and reliable information (Ndubisi & Wah, 2005). Communication in relationship marketing talks about how to remain in touch constantly with the company's valued customers, ensuring or rendering timely and precise information about the products or services rendered during or after the sale (Baron et al., 2010).

Ndubisi (2007) saw communication as a significant way of building customer awareness, the ability to understand customer favorites and perceptions, the convenience of the various customers, and stimulating repeat purchases. Sin et al. (2002) emphasize that communication, particularly suitable communication, promotes trust by supporting in solving disagreements and making explicit opinions and expectations. When effective communication exists between a firm and its valued customers, it establishes a better relationship, resulting in more customer loyalty (Gupta & Sahu, 2012). Hence, organizations need to maintain customers by improving the communication effectiveness between the firm and its customers, gathering customers' information, and improving and increasing customer service quality (Patsioura et al., 2009).

Conflicts frequently originate from observed inequity (Ndubisi, 2012). For example, if a customer observes unfair treatment, a conflict may arise. Therefore, if a customer observes the input-output ratio to be lesser than other customers, conflict may arise in the relationship (Anderson & Mittal, 2000). However, conflict-handling capability by a firm can increase the loyalty of customers. Crosby et al. (1990) theorized that the word conflict handling capability is one of the fundamental virtues that support relationship marketing and influence customer loyalty. Also, Rusbult et al. (1988) concluded by saying that the possibility of these characteristics and behavior in cases of individuals is determined by the degree of the previous satisfaction felt by the customer during the relationship, the level of investment of a customer that is put into the relationship, and also an assessment of the options available.

Conflict handling is the ability of the supplier to avoid possible conflicts, resolve obvious or evident conflicts that will create problems beforehand, and talk over solutions openly anytime a problem arises (Dwyer et al., 1987). Going by the review of previous literature, the focus of this study is to examine the influence of the variables of relationship marketing (such as trust, communication effectiveness, conflict handling, and commitment) on the variables of customer loyalty (such as attitudinal, behavioral and switching restraints). Therefore, to enable empirical examination, it proposed the following null hypothesis:

H_0: *There is no significant influence between relationship marketing variables (trust, communication effectiveness, conflict handling, and commitment) and loyalty of mobile phone customers (attitudinal, behavioral, and switching restraints).*
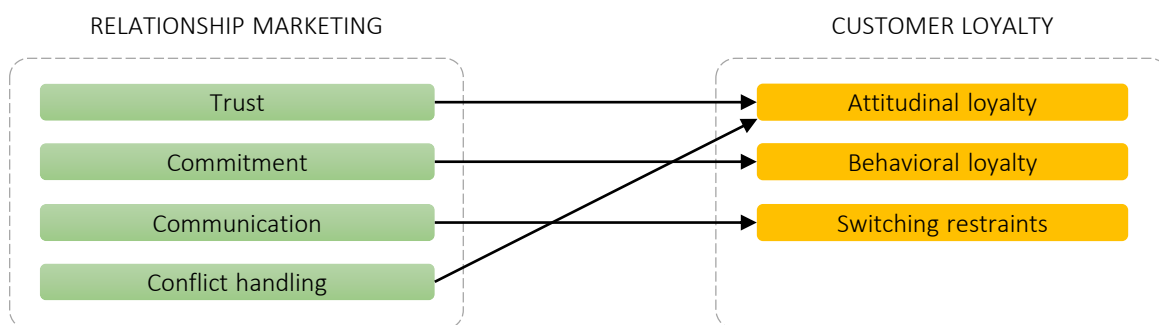

Figure 1. Conceptual model

2. METHODS

The required information for this study was carried out via the adoption of a questionnaire survey. The study population consisted of the academic and non-academic staff of a private university in South West, Nigeria. They have been patronizing the telecom provider for more than two years. Two hundred and fifty (250) questionnaires were administered. However, the retrieved 225 copies of questionnaires represented about 88.9% of the distributed questionnaires.

The study adopted the convenience sampling technique in administering the questionnaire to the users of mobile services customers during break time on weekdays. The empirical observations verified that almost all academic and non-academic staff subscribed to at least one of Nigeria's four foremost mobile telecommunication companies. Therefore, the study gave copies of the survey questionnaires to the academic and non-academic staff (customers) of Nigeria's four prominent telecommunication companies. The copies of questionnaires were properly edited and coded using the Statistical Package for Social sciences (SPSS) to analyze the data obtained for this study.

The questionnaire was partitioned into five segments. Segment A comprises inquiries on the respondents' data; same time, Segments B, C, D, and E contain pertinent examination inquiries identified with those key variables (dependent and independent) of the study being conveyed. The respondents were required to respond to questions using Strongly Agree, Agree, Undecided, Disagree, and Strongly Disagree responses as suitable. Multiple regression was utilized for testing the hypotheses through the SPSS package. Cronbach's Alpha of the estimation scale for the study was 0.728, which shows that the research instrument utilized for this study is dependable.

2.1. Ethical considerations

The study application for ethical clearance was filled to the Business and Management Research Ethics Committee (Approved No.: BMREC 22/212). The study team was provided an introductory let-

ter, which was delivered to the university's HR unit and stated the project's goal. It is worth noting that the HR director offered verbal approval for this analysis. An ethical guidelines clearance form was added to the original application letter. According to the Research Ethical Application Form, this type of study is classified as exempt research because it entails a study without or with low risk, i.e., level 1 research. Exempted study in business studies sometimes does not necessitate documented permission from the respondents in the interest of anonymity and secrecy, but authorization is frequently sufficient. By gaining verbal agreement, it was made sure that the participants were sufficiently briefed about the research background and objectives and continually updated mainly on the engagement process. Survey respondents (including academic and non-academic personnel) were adequately educated about their ability to refuse or engage, giving them more assurance in stating their opinion. The privacy rights and the exercise of the free will of respondents were both regarded as ethical concerns.

3. RESULTS

Table 1. Respondents' data

Items	N	Percentages
Gender		
Male	92	40.9
Female	133	59.1
Telecom providers		
MTN	72	32.0
Airtel	68	30.2
9mobile	47	20.9
Glo	38	16.9
Years with the telecom provider		
< 3years	67	29.8
> 3years	158	70.2

According to survey respondents' profiles, females comprised a slight majority of participants (59.1% to 40.9%). Only a little more than three-quarters (70.2%) of the respondents had been with their telecom provider for 3 years or more, and 29.8% have been with their telecom provider for between 2 and 3 years. Most of the survey respondents are customers of MTN, representing 32%, 30% are customers of Airtel, 20.9% are customers of 9mobile, and lastly, the customers of Glo represent 16.9.

Table 2. Relationship marketing
(trust, commitment, communication,
and conflict handling) and customer loyalty

Independent variable	T-value	F	Sig.	R^2
Trust	6.891	47.482	0.000	0.189
Commitment	3.828	14.652	0.000	0.064
Communication	3.084	9.509	0.000	0.041
Conflict handling	6.399	40.942	0.000	0.167

Note: Dependent Variable – Customer loyalty.

The result of the effect of trust on attitudinal loyalty from the first hypothesis revealed that trust plays a significant role in attitudinal loyalty. The t-value of 0.000 level of significance is 6.891, while f = 47.482 at P-value is equal to 0.000 with adjusted R^2 = 0.189. This corroborates the proposed hypothesis that there is a connection between trust and attitudinal loyalty. This implies that customers will be loyal if they trust the organization. The result of the influence of commitment and behavioral loyalty from the second hypothesis revealed that commitment significantly influences behavioral loyalty. The t-value of 0.000 level of significance is 3.828, while f = 14.652 at P-value is equal to 0.000 with adjusted R^2 = 0.064. This corroborates the proposed hypothesis two that there is a connection between commitment and behavioral loyalty. This means that the greater the level of commitment, the greater the behavioral loyalty.

The result of the influence of effective communication on switching restraints from the third hypothesis revealed that effective communication significantly influences customers' switching restraints. The t-value of 0.002 level of significance is 3.084, while f = 9.509 at P-value is equal to 0.000 with adjusted R^2 = 0.041. This corroborates the proposed hypothesis three that there is a relationship between commitment and behavioral loyalty. This means that the more effective the communication, the higher the level of customers' switching restraints. The finding of the influence of conflict handling and attitudinal loyalty from the fourth hypothesis revealed that conflict handling has a positive influence on attitudinal loyalty. The t-value of 0.000 level of significance is 6.399, while f = 40.942 at P-value is equal to 0.000 with adjusted R^2 = 0.167. This supports the proposed hypothesis four that conflict handling positively influences attitudinal loyalty.

4. DISCUSSION

Essentially, the findings of this study provide quantitative information on the impact of the four relationship marketing pillars (commitment, trust, communication, and conflict resolution) on the variables of client loyalty. By empirically correlating a more extensive list of antecedents to the predictor variables, these findings add validity to the literature. It builds on existing research in this field, which either looked at a preliminary list of possible theoretical foundations (Ndubisi et al., 2009) or linked them to make a significant contribution (Ndubisi & Wah, 2005) and client satisfaction (Wong & Sohal, 2002), without considering the end objective of any network operator, which is to develop loyal fans. This result revealed a link between trust and attitudinal loyalty. The consequence of this is that consumers will be devoted if they trust the organization. This attests to Mosavi and Ghaedi (2012), who confirmed that it is crucial to get customer trust.

The outcome showed that commitment influenced behavioral loyalty. This implies that the degree of commitment to customers, the better their positive behavior toward the organization. This finding is consistent with Morgan and Hunt (1994). In support of Laguna and Rosendo (2012) stance, the commitment makes a strong connection with customers, which is critical for relationship marketing. The consumer understands that the organizations are capable of dispelling scepticism, having the tools and components for the team members to function effectively, indicating that it is important to optimize in the mentoring of the employees at the front of the merchandise they monetize, in addition to driving innovation in the product offerings and embracing to satisfy customer's requirements and wants imply that the firm has expended resources in the consumer relationship and has gained their loyalty. Notably, this study provided the information that the more effective the communication, the better the degree of customers' switching restraints. This finding is consistent with Ndubisi (2007), which showed active communication inclines consumers to stay with the telecommunication provider. Customer loyalty can be built by delivering trustworthy and well-timed information, for instance, on the usage and importance of modern telecom-

munication services or the state of communications. Telecom service providers can strengthen the delivery of authentic information on what they are doing about prevailing difficulties and what they do to prevent possible ones. This study also supports Ndubisi (2012) that conflict handling positively influences attitudinal loyalty. Telecom customers are inclined to be adequately devoted to the organization that deals with customer objections and other disagreements adequately. It is thus imperative that adequate conflict resolve structures are proactively put in place to forestall likely springs of conflict and handle them before they are exhibited.

CONCLUSION

This study makes vital empirical contributions to the literature on relationship marketing and customer loyalty. This is significant given the scarcity of empirical corroboration on the validity of the connections between these indicators using a Nigerian dataset. From the analysis conducted, it is accurate to conclude that all the variables of relationship marketing, which include trust, effective communication, commitment, and conflict handling, positively influence customer loyalty.

It was discovered that the trust customers have for the organization will enhance their loyalty. It was established that the higher the degree of commitment to the customers, the higher their loyalty to the organization. It was also revealed that effective communication influences the switching restraint of customer, and effective management of conflict help to build attitudinal loyalty. Companies should concentrate their resources on developing and building effective relationships with their customers because it has a long-term benefit for the organization. Therefore, managers of mobile telecommunications companies should always ensure that they keep to their words when they make certain promises and offers; in doing this, the customer tends to trust them to be reliable and capable of meeting customer needs.

In addition, firms wishing to preserve and build loyal clients should portray themselves as truthful and dedicated to their service ethic. Employees and management of the organization should always show that they are committed to offering quality services to the customers. The staff needs to fully understand the value of retaining customers and show their commitment in their attitude, services provided, and ensuring the best for the customers.

Furthermore, organizations should be timely and accurate in communicating relevant information to their customers to build their confidence. They should adopt new technologies that enhance communication effectiveness and know the best communication method. A platform for customer feedback should be created to ease communication with the organization, which will help them improve their services. This is because customers love it when their voices are heard and attended to carefully.

Lastly, an organization should have a standard platform for resolving the customers' various complaints, and the firm's staff must know how to settle conflicts in a manner that will eradicate excessive loss and embarrassment to their customers. Therefore, a firm should provide proper training for the staff to deal with any situation that occurs with the customers and create departments that focus on handling customer conflict.

LIMITATIONS

Although this study adds to knowledge in the marketing field, however, using only one state, this paper comes with its limits in the generalization of the nation. Therefore, there is a need to carry out a multi-state analysis to examine how the relationship marketing and loyalty in the telecommunication sector can be carried out from a multi-state perspective.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Conceptualization: Taiye Borishade.
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Validation: Deborah Aka.
Visualization: Deborah Aka.
Writing – original draft: Taiye Borishade.
Writing – review & editing: Oladele Kehinde, Deborah Aka.

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