Digital Marketing Platforms and Customers Patronage of Online Retail Stores in Port Harcourt, Nigeria

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Abstract
This research examined the correlation between digital marketing platforms and consumer patronage of online retail enterprises in Port Harcourt. The study was directed by three goals, three research questions, and three hypotheses. The study's demographic consisted of 2,378,307 clients who used online retail businesses in the Port Harcourt metropolis. A sample size of 400 was used for this investigation, calculated using the Taro Yamane formula. The data gathering tool was a structured questionnaire named the Digital Marketing Platforms and Customer Patronage Questionnaire (DMTCPQ). The collected data were encoded in Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 23.0 and analysed using descriptive statistics, including percentages, mean, and standard deviation. Pearson Product Moment Correlation (PPMC) was employed to test the hypotheses at a 0.05 alpha level. The study's findings indicated a significant relationship between email marketing and repeat purchases in online retail stores in Port Harcourt; a significant relationship between online advertising and referrals in these stores; a significant relationship between social media marketing and brand loyalty in online retail stores; and that internet access significantly influences the relationship between digital marketing and customer patronage in online retail stores in Port Harcourt, among other factors. It was determined that digital marketing improves repeat purchases, referrals, and brand loyalty; also, the sales margin and income of online retail establishments might significantly increase if digital marketing platforms are used for product promotion. Based on the results, the researcher indicated that online retail enterprises using digital platforms should have a systematic approach to telling consumers about their items, since maintaining connectivity with customers is essential for businesses.

Keywords: *Digital marketing, platforms and customers patronage, online retail stores,*

Introduction

The impact of technological invention and innovation, along with the internet, on Business-to-Consumer (B2C) and Business-to-Business (B2B) organisations' investments in digital marketing is apparent in recent times ("Internet World Stats," 2014). This paradigm change aims to optimise profitability at minimal expense (Ngo, 2015). The advent of the internet did not alter the principles of marketing; rather, it facilitated corporations in using this technical domain to enhance customer service (Orapin, 2009). Currently, half of the global population utilises the internet via mobile phones, computers, tablets, and laptops. Consequently, the emergence of digital marketing enables consumers to acquire goods and services at their convenience, resulting in time savings, a wider selection, enhanced information access, and increased efficiency ("Internet World Stats," 2014). E-tailing companies like Konga, Jumia, eBay, and Amazon are now offering online purchasing experiences for consumers in Nigeria (Baetzgen & Tropp, 2013). E-tailing enterprises have used many strategies to serve, meet, and please online clients via these online platforms (Ngo, 2015). Consequently, acquiring knowledge about novel marketing methods and channels provides organisations with competitive advantages inside the sector.

Digital marketing is the use of technological equipment, techniques, and strategies in marketing activities. It is the promotion of products and services using online or internet-based platforms. In digital marketing, direct encounters between the marketer and customer are unnecessary, since communications may occur online (Henrietta, 2000). Digital marketing serves as a significant commercial channel for organisations to disseminate information and enhance client loyalty. It is regarded as a fundamental approach, grounded in the dynamism and complexity of the business environment, to successfully cultivate brand and customer loyalty.

The use of digital platforms to enhance client loyalty has become essential in today's volatile and competitive corporate environment. It is being used operationally as a tool to create leads and provide cost-effective goods or services to customers (Sin et al., 2012). Undoubtedly, the Internet has transformed the world in which we live. Prior to the advent of the Internet, several advertising methods existed across multiple media, including radio, television, newspapers, magazines, telemarketing, and pamphlets. The objective was often to disseminate a business and/or product name, together with a message, to the most number of individuals at the minimal cost. The Internet has fostered a more interconnected world, leading to a decline in the circulation of conventional media such as television, radio, newspapers, and magazines. Digital Marketing is the practice of using connection within this interconnected world for marketing purposes (Webster & Frederick 2002).

Customer perceptions and purchasing behaviours regarding online goods and services differ, necessitating a thorough study of consumer behaviour, the availability of company-related information, and the selection of suitable communication channels. Digital marketing information is to emphasise the firm's offerings (Baetzgen & Tropp, 2013). The information structure significantly influences the attitudes and purchasing intentions of internet customers. Contemporary technology and widespread internet access in households enable marketers to execute substantial advancements and develop worldwide campaigns within minutes. The internet, eBay, Amazon, Google, and YouTube consistently influence individuals and significantly contribute to the development of worldviews via online marketing, akin to the roles television, cinema, radio, and print played in the past (Rappaport, 2007).

Digital Marketing, also known as Electronic Marketing, is a contemporary concept and commercial practice focused on promoting products, services, information, and ideas over the Internet and other electronic channels. A survey of the relevant literature reveals that definitions of digital marketing (E-Marketing) differ based on each author's perspective, background, and area of expertise. Smith and Chaffey characterise it as "Achieving marketing objectives through applying electronic technologies" (Smith & Chaffey, 2005), whereas Strauss and Frost describe it as "The use of electronic data and applications for planning and executing the conception, distribution and pricing of ideas, goods and services to create exchanges that satisfy individual and organisational goals" (Strauss & Frost, 2001).

Digital marketing is comparatively cost-effective when evaluating the expense proportional to the audience reach. E-commerce platforms may access a broad audience at a little cost compared to conventional advertising expenditures. The characteristics of the media enable customers to investigate and acquire items and services at their convenience. Consequently, enterprises has the capability to engage customers in a medium that yields rapid outcomes.

As of 2007, digital marketing was expanding more rapidly than conventional media forms. Due to the superior trackability of exposure, reaction, and general efficiency of Internet media compared to conventional offline media. Digital marketing provides enhanced responsibility for marketers via the use of site analytics. Marketers and their clients are increasingly recognising the need of assessing the synergistic impacts of marketing, specifically how the Internet influences in-store sales, rather than isolating each advertising channel. The impact of multichannel marketing may be difficult to evaluate, however it is crucial for assessing the worth of media initiatives. The primary benefits of digital marketing are operational simplicity, connectedness, capacity to generate direct customer reactions, cost efficiency, and an expansive range of marketing activities, among others. Compared to conventional marketing, digital marketing is a more efficient, rapid, and cost-effective approach for companies to reach their target customers with goods and promotions. Digital marketing, commonly referred to as "internet/online marketing" or "virtual targeted marketing," enables marketers to identify clients with a high propensity for interest in their goods and to customise their marketing mix to effectively reach these specific customers (Rand & Ward, 2004).

Customer patronage denotes the situation in which customers acquire and use the products provided by a certain retail outlet. Consumer patronage is a crucial concept in marketing. The concept has been expressed from both behavioral and attitudinal viewpoints. Ding, Lu, and Ge (2015) characterized consumer patronage as the behavioral selection in which a client prefers one organization above its rivals within the same industry. In this sense, consumer patronage refers to the preference for a company's products or services. Garga and Bambale (2016) characterized client patronage as the extent to which an individual prefers a certain company's products or services, based on their assessment and personal experience.

Osman in Kumar (2016) offered a succinct definition of consumer patronage behavior as "the recurrent purchasing behavior at a particular company for either identical or alternative products." The theory of planned behavior posits that consumer patronage is determined by attitudes and intentions that precede customer behaviors. Attitude is a person's overall positive or negative evaluation of participating in a certain activity. A more positive attitude towards the activity is associated with an increased intention and likelihood of doing the behavior (Armitage and Conner in Jere, Aderele & Jere, 2014).

Consumer patronage is the only economic and social justification for a firm's existence, which is primarily focused on attaining customer satisfaction (Garga & Bambale, 2016). When customers are satisfied with the quality of service given, they are more likely to consistently engage with the company. Kumar (2016) said that supplementary factors influence customer patronage. Factors include the company's geographical location, organizational reputation, quality of service delivery, product quality, price, aesthetically pleasing dressing rooms, and availability of parking. This study examines service performance and its influence on customer patronage in the hotel industry. Heightened rivalry among online retail establishments is resulting in client loyalty challenges for these companies (Kline, 2000). Profitability derived from customer happiness is progressing slowly, which is concerning, particularly when these companies spend significantly in ICT to enhance customer service (Clark, 2012). E-tailing companies have sought methods to enhance consumer loyalty and increase online shop traffic, resulting in several research on the subject (Tobassum & Rahman, 2012; Shwu-Ing, 2003). It is noteworthy to state that the rise in internet use does not inherently imply online consumer engagement. Research reveals that 81% of individuals who visit websites for products and services do not engage in online purchasing (Kline, 2000). A significant proportion of Nigerians (76%), particularly the youth, used the internet for non-commercial purposes, including information retrieval, gaming, entertainment, and social communication (Narges, 2009). The primary concern is to determine if digital marketing favourably influences customers' attitudes and purchase intentions about online retail establishments.

Online shopping is a mode of electronic commerce enabling customers to purchase products or services directly from a vendor over the Internet, via a web browser or mobile application. Phillip (2014) asserts that internet shopping is gaining popularity in Nigeria, attributed to its ease and the competitive pricing of products and services offered online. EINSR (2014) indicated that Nigeria's online shopping industry expanded from N49.9 billion to N62.4 billion between 2010 and 2011, and from N62.4 billion to N78 billion between 2011 and 2012, reflecting a 25 percent rise in each interval. The consumer's attitude towards internet buying reflects their psychological disposition about purchasing decisions. Trepper (2018) asserts that consumer purchase choices are shaped by perception, motivation, learning, attitudes, and beliefs. Nagar (2016) examined the factors influencing e-store patronage intentions in India. It was observed that customers' online shop patronage was positively correlated with "choice overload," indicating that the availability of extensive assortments online increases the likelihood of consumers patronising such e-retailers. Choice overload in the online environment was shown to favourably affect customers' propensity for impulsive purchases (unplanned spontaneous acquisitions) and had a beneficial impact on internet shopping anxiety.

Aim and Objectives of the Study

The aim of this study is to investigate the relationship that exist between digital marketing platforms and customers patronage of online retail stores in Port Harcourt.

The specific objectives of the study include the following

i. to determine the relationship between email marketing and repeat purchase in online retail stores in Port Harcourt.
ii. to determine the relationship between email marketing and referrals in online retail stores in Port Harcourt.
iii. to ascertain the relationship between email marketing and brand loyalty in online retail stores in Port Harcourt.

Research Hypothesis

The following hypotheses were formulated to guide the study

Ho_1: There is no significant relationship between email marketing and repeat purchase in online retail stores in Port Harcourt

Ho_2: There is no significant relationship between email marketing and referrals in online retail stores in Port Harcourt.

Ho_3: There is no significant relationship between email marketing and brand loyalty in online retail stores in Port Harcourt.

Conceptual Review

Here, efforts were made to review the various concepts employed in this study.

Digital Marketing

Digital marketing is the promotion of items with computerised technology to reach target clients (Khan & Islam, 2017). It entails delivering marketing services via mobile phones, display advertising, and other digital platforms to enhance brand promotion (Khan & Islam, 2017). Ngugi (2013) said that digital marketing encompasses the use of the internet and information technology to communicate, enhance, and transform the relationship between firms and their clients. The cost-effectiveness and interactivity of digital channels enable continuous communication between the firm and its consumers (Merisawo, 2008). Companies may now maintain continuous communication with their esteemed clients and enhance interaction at a reduced cost. Merisawo (2008) said that digital channels, including the internet, mobile phones, email, and digital TVs, enhance a company's frequent and engaging engagement with consumers, hence improving customer retention. Ngugi (2013) contended that maintaining consistent communication and engagement with clients would aid the organisation in retaining clientele within a fiercely competitive sector. He also said that when a firm consistently engages with its consumers by disseminating supplementary information about its brand (such as developments and repurchase reminders), it will foster client retention and loyalty towards the company's services. Gommans, Krishnan, and Scheffold (2001) assert that a more acute marketing emphasis is essential for cultivating and sustaining consumer loyalty in digital marketplaces. Brand image and brand identity must be established via online mass media communications (Gommans et al., 2001); hence, marketers must assure successful conversation between the brand and customers (Wood, 2000). Brand equity significantly influences the processes of information acquisition, retrieval, and communication among customers in online settings during final purchase choices (Chattopadhyay et al., 2010).

Dimensions of Digital Marketing

Digital marketing is a multifaceted idea that may be executed in several ways. Digital marketing may be conducted via email, internet platforms, or social media. The following sections elaborate on these aspects of e-marketing:

E-mail Marketing

Halinen (2000) characterizes email marketing as the direct transmission of a commercial communication to a specific audience using email. Organizations use email as a primary marketing platform. Christopher and MClark (2009) contend that e-marketing serves as a mechanism to inform clients about their organization. This allows the client to comprehend the goods and services provided by a firm. Email marketing aims to cultivate loyalty, trust, and brand recognition (Conway & Swift, 2000). The commitment-trust hypothesis posits that trust and confidence are fundamental elements in developing robust customer relationships. This enhances the likelihood of sustained sales, ultimately resulting in client retention. This demonstrates that any organization seeking to thrive in customer retention must cultivate confidence and trust in its goods and services to achieve consumer loyalty.

Online Advertising

Online advertising has been defined in several ways by numerous professionals and publications. Khan and Islam (2017) characterized online advertising as the exchange of goods and services via electronic devices from vendor to consumer. Khan and Islam (2017) characterized online advertising as the use of web-based and interactive technology to create a connection between enterprises and their clientele. Adede, Kibera, and Owino (2017) characterized online advertising as the use of marketing concepts to communicate a company's offerings using internet technology. El-Gohary (2010) challenged Kotler's definition, arguing that online advertising relies not just on the internet for product communication and customer relationship management, but also includes both internet and electronic technologies. Adede et al. (2017) supported El-Gohary's viewpoint, contending that online advertising encompasses interactive behaviors that augment customer involvement beyond just reliance on internet technology. Baker and Sinkula (2005) said that online advertising involves the use of electronic technology, including both online and offline activities to achieve marketing goals. Technology is crucial for the implementation of online advertising. Dann and Dann (2011) said that organizations seeking to participate in online advertising must use technology that incorporates electronic components and interactivity. Adede et al. (2017) said that organizations seeking to follow online advertising principles must provide resources, including technology and talent development, to guarantee effective online advertising practices. Some companies are doing their marketing activities with technological devices (Ngugi, 2013).

Social Media Marketing

Social media is defined as a communicative social instrument. Social media substantially expands an organization's reach and clientele. Key principles for the effective use of social media as a marketing platform include the law of listening, the law of focus, the law of quality, the rule of patience, the law of compounding, and the law of influence, among others (Palmer, 2007). A disadvantage of social media is the difficulty in measuring return on investment and evaluating the value of one channel relative to another (Mulki & Stock, 2003).

Social media marketing is a division of internet marketing that involves the generation and distribution of content on social media platforms to achieve marketing and branding goals (Wordstream, 2017). It encompasses activities such as disseminating text and image updates, videos, and other content that augment audience engagement, alongside paid social advertising. Safko et al. (2009) said that social media marketing is a facet of inbound marketing, when organizations convey messages or information to consumers and get feedback from them. Social media marketing is used to manage a company's brand identity and interact with customers via social media platforms. This is an outstanding method for the organization to sustain customer loyalty to its brand (Safko et al., 2009). Mustafa (2011) said that social media marketing enables customer feedback via the company's social media platform. He said that the presence of businesses and consumers on social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, LinkedIn, and YouTube augments social media marketing, since both parties may use these channels for regular contact and engagement.

Social media marketing serves as an effective instrument for enterprises of all scales to engage potential clients. Assaad and Gomez (2013) observed that consumers are engaging with companies via social media, and if a firm fails to communicate directly with its target audience on platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Pinterest, it is forfeiting opportunities. Effective social media marketing may provide significant results for a firm (Felix, Rauschnabel & Hinsch, 2016).

Referral: In marketing operations, referral denotes the practice of advertising items or services to prospective clients by recommendations, often via word of mouth. Referrals often occur naturally; nevertheless, organisations may shape this phenomenon via effective techniques. In marketing, referral denotes the act of promoting and substantially augmenting recommendations by word of mouth, perhaps the most ancient and reliable marketing method. This may be achieved by incentivising and compensating consumers, as well as many other connections, to endorse items and services from consumer brands, both digitally and physically. Online referral marketing is an internet-based, or Software as a Service (SaaS), adaptation of conventional referral marketing. Utilising web browser cookies and analogous technologies to monitor client behaviour online, referral marketing may enhance brand exposure, referrals, and eventually, income.

Brand Loyalty: Brand loyalty often hinges on consumer perception; it is a process in which a customer opts to consistently buy a product from the same firm rather than an alternative offered by a rival. For instance, some individuals always buy Coke in the supermarket, but others invariably choose for Pepsi. A buyer would continuously buy the same product due to the perception of its superiority among alternative options. It is important to recognise that brand loyalty often pertains to a product rather than a corporation. For instance, while you may exhibit loyalty to your high Lander jeep, you could contend that a Harley outperforms a Honda motorbike (Berry, 2014).

The motivations for brand loyalty are crucial for several reasons. Initially, it lowers manufacturing costs due to an increased sales volume. Secondly, organisations with brand-loyal consumers incur lower marketing expenses, allowing them to either save more profits or allocate resources to other ventures. Third, corporations may use premium pricing to enhance profit margins. Loyal consumers often endorse items they favour. Businesses must invest considerable effort to cultivate brand loyalty. It is essential to persuade prospective clients that your product has a substantial advantage over competing offerings to warrant their ongoing purchases. Businesses will seek to capitalise on brand loyalty established for one product to promote other items within the firm. The objective is to cultivate brand loyalty for a maximum number of goods (Fournier, 2018).

Empirical Review

This section aims to provide current scientific publications, methodologies used, and conclusions of prior researchers on this issue. An empirical assessment of digital marketing and client patronage indicated that less academic research has been conducted on this subject. Bezbaruah and Trivedi (2020) discussed branded content as a means to cultivate relationships with Generation Z consumers. The research examined the impact of promoted web videos on Generation Z consumers. A descriptive research design was used to perform the study. A structured questionnaire was sent to 470 online participants. Cronbach's alpha, exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses, structural equation modelling (SEM), and hierarchical regression analysis were performed for data analysis. The results indicate that branded internet videos have a considerable impact on brand attitude, which subsequently influences purchase intention. The findings indicate that consumer interaction does not influence the association between branded web videos and brand attitude.

Weerasinghe (2018) conducted an empirical investigation on the influence of digital marketing on customer online engagement in Sri Lanka. The study used the five aspects of digital marketing identified by Andac et al. (2016): shareable, comprehensible, incentives, accessible, and absorbing. Descriptive and bivariate analyses were employed to evaluate the research data. Seventy-five online surveys were disseminated using convenience sampling. The results indicated a favourable relationship between digital marketing strategies and online engagement.

Holliman and Rowley (2014) examined business-to-business digital marketing and marketers' perceptions of best practices in the United States, the United Kingdom, and France. The research included a qualitative exploratory survey, using structured interviews and questionnaires delivered to fifteen participants across five industries: technology hardware and software, recruiting, business and professional services, marketing services, and recycling and renewable energy. Interviewers had top roles within their respective organisations. The research used consumer involvement, brand communication, and value as parameters. The discovery indicated that B2B digital marketing is an inbound strategy influenced by web pages, social media, and value-added digital content, significantly impacting brand reputation maintenance.

Yaqubi and Karaduman (2019) experimentally investigated the influence of digital marketing on consumer patronage of home appliances in Afghanistan. The research used a quantitative methodology with a sample size of 384 participants. The acquired data were analysed with SPSS version 22. The research used measurement, client engagement, and conversion as parameters. Convenience sampling was used. The findings indicate that digital marketing significantly influences client patronage, and organisations are encouraged to foster customer interaction relationships. Milhinhos (2015) examine the influence of digital marketing on the attitudes and purchasing behaviour of online consumers. The situation regarding video, tutorials, and user-generated digital content in Brazil. The research was an exploratory survey. Four hundred thirty-nine questionnaires were distributed, of which two hundred two were deemed suitable for the research. 58.4% of the participants were female, while 41.6% were male. Qualitative web software and SPSS were used to analyse descriptive data. The study findings indicated that digital marketing on commercial product sites is relevant and positively influences customer attitudes and patronage. Aadarsh (2015) examined the importance of digital marketing via social media for the fitness sector in Ireland. The study used exploratory research, administering a questionnaire to 107 randomly selected respondents. The study demonstrated that consumer involvement with media positively influences trust and loyalty towards fitness companies.
Chan and Astari (2017) conducted an investigation of digital marketing and online repeat purchases in Indonesian fashion retail establishments. The research used the framework of electronic media, consumer involvement, and objectives proposed by Elisa and Gordini (2014). The researchers used a descriptive methodology using a qualitative approach. The methods used for data collecting were observation and structured interviews. Research indicates that digital marketing significantly impacts online fashion retailers, since these companies have adopted all facets of digital marketing, including content development, consumer involvement, and delivery methods, with the overarching objective of digital management techniques. Elisa and Gordini (2014) examined digital marketing measures, focussing on theoretical considerations, empirical data, and the efficacy of digital communication across 235 Italian enterprises. The research used consumer involvement and objectives as parameters. The research used an online questionnaire targeting 1,000 marketing managers from Italian enterprises, with a sample size of five multiple-choice questions and 15 items assessed on a Likert scale. Two hundred and two businesses submitted their surveys. The findings indicated that effective internet advertising positively influences recurrent purchases. Lindstrom and Jorneus (2016) examined co-creation value with customers via digital marketing in Sweden, using an exploratory study approach and various case studies that used structured interviews, focussing on an organisational level of analysis. The research population included eight distinct organisations, including those in digital marketing, editorial roles, chief executive officers, global digital managers, marketing communication managers, and associates in digital marketing, as well as sectors such as manufacturing, banking, insurance, retail, and tourism. The research used the DART model proposed by Prehalad and Ramaswamy (2004), which comprises the aspects of dialogue, access,

transparency, and risk-benefit assessment. The study's findings demonstrated a robust correlation between digital marketing and customer referrals.

Theoretical Framework

Social Network Theory

The onset of the century has seen the widespread use of fundamental network concepts across several study domains, with the field continually enhanced by increasingly sophisticated network metrics and analytical tools. Social network theory emphasises the relational connections and structural positions of individual players within a network, influencing the dissemination of media messages and their effects on audience engagement. The consequences include public opinion formation, marketing, media consumption uses and pleasure, and behavioural change resulting from pro-social education (Liu et al., 2017). The social network theory is based on three theoretical methods that effectively illustrate the impact of social theory, including the two-step flow of communication hypothesis. The two-step flow of communication revolves around the notion of opinion leaders, individuals who exert influence within particular domains. Research has sought to delineate the essential traits linked to influence and opinion leadership (Katz, 1957), encompassing attributes such as charisma, demographics, socio-economic status, knowledge, expertise, and the capacity to convey information on significant issues, balancing distance and intimacy (Freeman, 2009). Organisations and telecom operators' capacity to efficiently connect with contacts inside an individual's network renders those with elevated closeness centrality influential (Liu et al., 2017). The social network theory facilitates the diffusion of innovation within a social system, wherein its participants initiate and adopt innovations through a network characterised by connections such as friendship, advice, communication, or social support, forming an interconnected web of social relationships (Valente, 2005). Rice (2011) conceptualises diffusion within media effects as the process by which an innovation, idea, product, technology, process, or service disseminates at varying rates through mass and digital media, as well as interpersonal and network communication, over time within a social system, yielding diverse consequences, both positive and negative.

This research examines digital marketing and client patronage in online retail establishments in Port Harcourt, grounded in social network theory owing to the relational connections inside the structured network platform. Weich (2009) notes that, beyond their physical attributes, organisations are comprised of patterns and recurrent interactions within social networks (Preffer, 2002); social interaction is a fundamental element upon which organisations are established. Ahiazu and Asawo (2016) define a social network as a continuous and organised collection of independent entities (individuals or organisations) that collaborate based on implicit and indefinite agreements. They contend that such contracts are socially, rather than legally, binding. The social network theory is based on the premise of social interaction among interacting entities. Balkundi and Kudurf (2005) assert that actors are the most significant differentiating characteristic of the network research program. The foundational premise of social network theory is based on the interactions among actors rather than only on the individual features of the actors themselves. The foundational premise of this basic theory is therefore centred on the idea of the social man. The notion posits that humans live inside a network of relationships; this perspective led to the emergence of the human relations movement. Burt (2000) posits that network linkages form social capital, which yields value, including economic gains. Social capital is fundamental to social network analysis (Brass & Krackhardt, 2009). The adoption process often involves acquiring knowledge about a new product, gathering further information, deciding whether to adopt it, experimenting with it, and ultimately affirming its use. The weak ties hypothesis in social networks addresses the function of weak relationships in disseminating ideas and information. Individuals depend on weak links rather than familial connections for knowledge, since weak relationships are more likely to provide unique information compared to strong ones (Granovetter, 2003). Social network theory provides a unique lens for analysing ad set tools to comprehend media effects, particularly as emerging technologies like social networking sites, micro-blogging platforms, and online recommendations present intriguing opportunities for the application of this theory (Gruzd & Wellman, 2014). The second social network hypothesis emphasises the extensive and innovative data accessible via social media, enabling rigorous testing of network-based impact ideas in previously unattainable ways. Media research has started to expand social network theory and methodology beyond traditional social contagion processes to explore what Oguyanova & Monge (2013) termed the relational reinterpretation of mass media effects.

Third, continuous guidance in statistical methodologies used in social media analysis ensures continuing improvement in the complexity with which researchers may model the interplay between social structure and media effects, accommodating various types of linkages, actors, and multi-level networks. These advancements are especially pertinent in a new media landscape where individuals may simultaneously serve as both creators and consumers, accessing digital content from many sources and using diverse media formats. Consequently, our current research used digital marketing tactics as the independent variable; broadband capacity was defined as the moderating variable, while consumer choice served as the dependent variable. Social network theory is recognised as a contributing component to digital marketing strategies and consumer decision-making; hence, the unit of study is at the person level, with users and consumers of mobile telecommunications serving as responders. This research is based on social network theory as its foundation.

Materials and Methods

This study adopted a descriptive survey design involving a correlational approach. This design was used in order to find out the relationship between the dependent and the independent variable. The population of the study comprised of 2,378,307 customers who patronized online retail stores in the Port Harcourt metropolis (https://www.statista.com/statistics/1139883/digital-buyers-in-nigeria). A sample size of 400 was utilized for this study. this was determined using the Taro Yamane formula (see appendix). A sample denotes a portion of the population that the researcher intends to examine (Field, 2005). Consequently, the sampling strategy used in this study was simple random sampling, ensuring that every customer had an equal opportunity to be picked for participation.

The main instrument for data collection was a structured questionnaire. Data was collected in three variables; the predictor; digital marketing techniques, the criterion variable; customers patronage and the moderating variable; customer retention. A cross-sectional design was employed for this correlational study and data was obtained through a well-structured questionnaire. The instrument to be used was titled Digital Marketing Platforms and Customer Patronage Questionnaire (DMPCPQ). The instrument had three sections, section A, which elicited information on the socio-demographic data of the respondents, the section B, measured the dimensions of digital marketing and customer patronage whereas section C quantified issues associated with customer patronage. The items of DMTCPQ was measured data on a 4-point Likert scale (Haque, 2002; Baridam, 2008).

Completed data were retrieved and coded into the Statistical Package for Social Sciences, SPSS version 21.0. Percentages, Mean, standard deviation and Pearson Product Moment Correlation (PPMC) were used for data analysis. Specifically, the demographic data were analyzed using the simple percentages, the research questions was analysed using frequency, mean and standard deviation, and the hypotheses were tested using Pearson Product Moment Correlation (PPMC).

Data Presentation

Table 4.1: Questionnaire Response Pattern

Number administered	Number returned	Number used	Percentage used
350	335	335	95.7%

Source: Field Survey (2021)

The table above indicates that out of 350 questionnaires were administered to the respondents, 335 were returned and 335 pieces of the survey were adequately filled and were utilized for the analysis representing 95.7% of the sample size.

Bivariate Analysis

This section will apply the numerous hypotheses suggested for this research to statistical testing using the Pearson Product Moment Correlation coefficient.

Table 4.14: Description of the Degree of Association between Variables

Correlation Coefficient (r)	Description/Interpretation
± 0.80 – 1.0	Very Strong
± 0.60 – 0.79	Strong
± 0.40 – 0.59	Moderate
± 0.20 – 0.39	Weak
± 0.00 – 0.19	Very Weak

The positive (+) sign in the value of r signifies a direct association, while the negative (-) sign implies an inverse relationship. Consequently, the sign of the r value indicates the direction of the association or the nature of the link between the variables.

Decision Rule

Decision: If sig = $p > 0.05$ the hypothesis is rejected

If sig = $p \leq 0.05$ the hypothesis is accepted

Hypothesis 1: There is no significant relationship between email marketing and repeat purchase in online retail stores in Port Harcourt

Table 4.15: Relationship between email marketing and repeat purchase

Correlations

		Email Marketing	**Repeat Purchase**	**Decision**
	Pearson Correlation	1	.908	Rejected
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.009	
Email Marketing	N	335	335	
Repeat Purchase	Pearson Correlation	.908	1	
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.009		
	N	335	335	

***S= Significant p<0.05**

The statistical hypothesis testing indicated a robust positive link between email marketing and repeat purchases, shown by a correlation coefficient of r = 0.908 (90.8%). The null hypothesis, which posits no significant association between email marketing and repeat purchases in online retail sites in Port Harcourt, was rejected, whereas the alternative hypothesis was accepted [(P = .009) $p < 0.05$].

Hypothesis 2: There is no significant relationship between email marketing and referrals in online retail stores in Port Harcourt

Table 4.16: Relationship between email marketing and referrals

Correlations

		Email Marketing	**Referrals**	**Decision**
	Pearson Correlation	1	.490	Rejected
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000	
Email Marketing	N	335	335	
Referrals	Pearson Correlation	.490	1	
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000		
	N	335	335	

***S= Significant p<0.05**

The statistical hypothesis testing indicated a modest positive association between email marketing and referrals, shown by a correlation coefficient of r = 0.490 (49%). The null hypothesis, asserting no significant association between email marketing and referrals in online retail sites in Port Harcourt, was rejected, whereas the alternative hypothesis was accepted [(P = .000) $p < 0.05$].

Hypothesis 3: There is no significant relationship between email marketing and brand loyalty in online retail stores in Port Harcourt

Table 4.17: Relationship between email marketing and brand loyalty

Correlations

		Email Marketing	**Brand Loyalty**	**Decision**
	Pearson Correlation	1	.615	Rejected
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000	
Email Marketing	N	335	335	
Brand Loyalty	Pearson Correlation	.615	1	
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000		
	N	335	335	

***S= Significant p<0.05**

In the statistical analysis of hypothesis three, a robust positive connection was identified between email marketing and brand loyalty, shown by a correlation coefficient of r = 0.615 (61.5%). The null hypothesis, which posits no significant association between email marketing and brand loyalty in online retail outlets in Port Harcourt, was rejected, whereas the alternative hypothesis was accepted [(P = .000) $p < 0.05$].

Results

Based on the findings, the following results were identified:

1. There was a very strong positive relationship between email marketing and repeat purchase in online retail stores in Port Harcourt [r = 0.908 (90.8%)].
2. There was a moderate positive relationship between email marketing and referrals in online retail stores in Port Harcourt [r = 0.490 (49%)].
3. There was a strong positive relationship between email marketing and brand loyalty in online retail stores in Port Harcourt [r = 0.615 (61.5%)].

Discussion of Findings

The study's results revealed a strong positive connection between email marketing and repeat sales, indicating a significant relationship between the two in online retail companies in Port Harcourt. This corresponds with the research conducted by Asadi and Noruzi (2019), who investigated digital marketing and online trust in relation to enhancing knowledge for video game customers. The results demonstrated that many digital channels providing online advertising messages were positively associated with customer repeat purchases. The data also indicated that written reviews by experts, such as Twitter updates, video clips, news articles, and step-by-step instruction, favorably impacted online customer confidence. Kagendo (2015) performed an empirical investigation on the effects of electronic marketing on customer retention at Safaricom Limited. The findings demonstrated that e-marketing substantially improves customer retention at Safaricom Limited. The study revealed that the e-marketing elements enhancing customer retention include social media marketing, digital marketing, email marketing, and offline communication efforts, such as digital displays and motion images.

The study's results revealed a moderate positive connection between email marketing and referrals, indicating a significant relationship between the two in online retail businesses in Port Harcourt. This result corresponds with the research conducted by Lindstrom and Jorneus (2016), which investigated co-creation value with consumers using digital marketing in Sweden. The study's results indicated a strong relationship between digital marketing and customer referrals. Yaqubi and Karaduman (2019) conducted empirical study on the impact of digital marketing on customer patronage of home appliances in Afghanistan. The results demonstrate that digital marketing substantially affects consumer loyalty, prompting organizations to foster connections of customer engagement.

This study revealed a strong positive link between email marketing and brand loyalty; however, it identified no significant relationship between email marketing and brand loyalty in online retail businesses in Port Harcourt. This corresponds with the study undertaken by Martin and Merisavo (2003) on the relationship between email marketing and brand loyalty in the cosmetics industry. The study's findings revealed that most customers consistently made purchases thanks to persistent email reminders from the organization. Brinkman (2018) analyzed the influence of digital marketing on e-commerce in Europe. This research demonstrates a strong association between email marketing and customer loyalty, indicating that heightened customer satisfaction and engagement is likely to improve customer loyalty. Ajina (2019) performed an empirical study on the influence of digital marketing on customer loyalty, concentrating on private hospitals in Saudi Arabia. The discovery indicates that digital marketing has a favorable impact on customer engagement, trust, and loyalty. Moreover, the positive effect of customer engagement on trust has been recognized, suggesting that private healthcare organizations must adopt a multi-channel digital marketing strategy to maximize its benefits. Khan and Islam (2017) conducted an experimental study on the impact of digital marketing on improving customer loyalty. The study revealed that value-added features were the primary determinants of customer loyalty in digital marketing. The poll revealed that content quality, customer service traits, and 24/7 availability were ranked second, third, and fourth, respectively. Merisavo and Raulas (2004) investigated the impact of e-mail marketing on brand loyalty in the cosmetics industry. After analyzing the collected data, the researcher concluded that regular email marketing enhances brand loyalty. A study investigating the correlation between online marketing and client loyalty revealed that e-marketing, including digital, email, and social media strategies, favorably affects consumer loyalty (Kagendo, 2015).

Conclusions

This study demonstrates the correlation between digital marketing platforms and consumer patronage of online retail enterprises in Port Harcourt. This study's results indicate that efficient digital marketing platforms will increase client patronage in online retail establishments. This research offers fresh information from a developing nation that enhances the previous literature about the influence of digital marketing platforms on client patronage. Digital marketing increases repeat purchases, recommendations, and brand loyalty. The study's results suggested that the sales margin and income of online retail establishments might significantly increase if systematic digital marketing tactics are used to promote their items. Therefore, more efforts must be focused on using innovative digital marketing channels to enhance sales.

Recommendations

In accordance with the study findings, the researcher made the following recommendations:

i. Engaging customers online to solicit suggestions would also give the company insight to co-innovate.
ii. Since the majority of digital marketing platform consumers are trained adults, online retail websites and applications should be built to pop-up real-life nuggets and hacks to fill in emotional needs, according to the report.
iii. Online retail companies that are using online platforms should systemize of notifying customers of their products, as it is vital for companies to stay connected with their customers.

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