

Branding and Subscribers' Patronage of Airtel Nigeria in Imo State

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Abstract

Although branding can achieve a level of attention and attraction, the relationship between Airtel branding and subscribers' patronage behaviour is necessary for a study, considering that the company known as Airtel has transformed multiple times in its identity and management structure. The Nicosia theory and Howard-Seth Model of Buyer Behaviour formed the theoretical foundation for the study. While four research questions were formulated to guide the study, the study population of 1,134,000 subscribers of Airtel in Imo State was adopted. The researchers used the survey technique to study the entire population while data for the study were generated using the questionnaire. The data obtained from the questionnaire were analysed using the Four-Point Likert Scale formula, tabulation and explanations. The study found out that the branding strategies adopted by Airtel were effective for subscribers' patronage in Imo State as it showed that strategies such as brand communication, promotion packages including SMS rewards, data subscription rewards, among others were effective in encouraging subscribers to patronise Airtel services and equally remain loyal to it. The study also found out that subscribers significantly recognised Airtel branding. Brand elements such as colour, slogan and logo helped subscribers to easily identify the brand. The study recommended that Airtel should maintain and improve on branding strategies for its services to continue to sustain their desired position in Imo State and the telecommunications market in Nigeria. It should rebrand its services from time to time to refresh the reality of its products and services as well as drive subscribers' patronage.

Keywords: Branding, Airtel, Consumer Behaviour, Telecommunications

1. Introduction

Every individual or organisation has something it represents. This representation is known as a brand and branding distinguishes one from another. The relevance of branding has been compared to a child's naming ceremony because it aims to create, in the minds of consumers, favourable and unique message that can drive consumer patronage and loyalty. Branding aligns the personality, values, vision and identity of a brand, to accurately reflect what it represents.

It is the foundation on which an organisation is built. It projects and protects an organisation's image in the minds of employees, customers, prospects, competitors, and the general public.

Branding has been used for centuries, right from the time of ancient pottery, when stonemasons' marks were imprinted on handcrafted goods to identify who made them. At that time, pottery products were sold far from the shops where they were manufactured, encouraging buyers to look for the stamps of reliable potters who they assumed produced quality goods. According to Keller (2013), the motivation for branding at that time was for artisans and others to identify the fruits of their labour. Using branding, consumers can identify products and services that can live up to their expectations based on prior experiences with the brand, recommendations from other customers, and word-of-mouth (Hestad, 2016). Branding is a tool for image creation, presentation and communication based on the longstanding idea of the organisation, which links it to what it stands for. Similarly, it informs the public about an establishment, attracting and holding customers' attention to the organisation, thereby giving it an edge over others. Branding facilitates a connection between the brand and its stakeholders, establishing trust and loyalty. Therefore, an organisation that ignores branding is likely to encounter little or no patronage and possible issues that can generate a crisis or eventual failure. They cannot thrive without branding because it is the vehicle that drives visibility, trust and customers' patronage of products and services.

Telecommunication is one of the necessities in human society today and this is explained by the fact that it is vital for communication, and technological advancement. Iwuagwu (2014) holds the view that, telecommunications networks promote global information exchange and keep citizens in touch with each other, the media and government institutions. New forms of communication have emerged because of the introduction of the Global System for Mobile (GSM) telecommunications technology. The technology is made in such a way that people and organisations all over the world find it easier to stay up to date on the operations of other people, businesses, and governments functioning in both remote and near regions.

MTN Nigeria Limited was the first GSM Company to launch its services in May 2001. Econet Wireless (now Airtel) followed the trail, launching its services two months after (Dixon-Ogbechi & Jagun, 2013). In September 2002, Global Communications Limited (GLOBACOM) received the digital license to operate in the country. Etisalat (now 9Mobile) was the last to be granted GSM license in 2007 by the Nigerian Communications Commission (NCC) and it began full operations in October 2008. According to Pyramid Research (2010), these top four GSM operators account for over eight five percent (85%) of mobile subscriptions in the country. Since its beginning till date, the telecommunications industry in Nigeria has grown remarkably, brewing fair competition among companies that are on their toes to become the best among subscribers. Pyramid Research reports that in 2008 alone, Nigeria accounted for over sixty-three million (63,000,000) subscribers in Africa's mobile market, surpassing South Africa. Because of the competition in Nigeria's telecoms market, mobile service providers devise strategies constantly, seeking ways to improve network challenges and quality of services to meet customer expectations. More so, to create good awareness and encouraging patronage by prospects toward services.

The focus of this study is Airtel. Airtel is a leading telecommunications network in Nigeria that has undergone series of changes. The company began operation in August 2001

as Econet Wireless when it won the bid to operate the Digital Mobile License (DML) for communication service in Nigeria. On August 5, 2001, it became the first telecommunications network to launch commercial Global System for Mobile Communication (GSM) services in Nigeria. After two years of successful operations, the company experienced a management crisis that plunged it into near bankruptcy. Vodacom took over the management of the company in 2004. However, months after taking over, Vodacom resigned from its position over a dispute in the payment of brokerage fees. This change brought in Vee Networks (V-mobile), which took over a base of over one million subscribers (1,000,000) across the country. Shortly after taking over in 2004, V-mobile launched a rebranding campaign, reassuring customers of its commitment to work in their interest as it unveiled the slogan *'it's all about you.'*

In May 2006, Celtel communications acquired V-mobile for one billion, five million dollars (1,500,000,000) and its five million (5,000,000) subscriber base, gaining the company's controlling share of 65 per cent ownership (Okwumbu, 2020). Two years after Celtel had gained control over the company, Zain Group came in 2008 and acquired all Celtel's operations home and abroad, rebranding the entire company's operations in Africa to Zain. Two years later, in November 2010, Bharti Airtel took over Zain Nigeria for the sum of ten billion, seven hundred million dollars and since it took over Zain Nigeria thirteen years ago, the management of Bharti Airtel has been in firm control.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Since the beginning of its operations in 2010, Airtel has claimed to be the pioneer of innovative ideas in the Nigerian telecommunications industry, one of the fastest growing industries, with a rapid increase in competition. As a result of the rise in competition, network providers are constantly developing strategies to out-perform others while attracting and keeping subscribers. On the other hand, subscribers with their own needs and preferences remain the organisations' target.

In this highly competitive telecommunications market in Nigeria, branding may be the only way to maintain consistency, relevance and continuous patronage. Logically, any organisation that has passed through the phase of change that Airtel has undergone over a short period of time has the tendency of losing a number of its customers, considering the inconsistency in management. Even with these changes, Airtel in the last thirteen years, has remained a strong competitor in the telecommunications market with a growing subscriber base across Nigeria, particularly in Imo State. Following the above, the thrust of the study: the influence of Airtel branding on subscribers' patronage in Imo State.

1.3 Aim and Objectives of the Study

The aim of this study was to find out the influence of Airtel branding on subscribers' patronage in Imo State. The objectives of the study were to:

1. ascertain the branding strategies used by Airtel for subscribers' patronage in Imo State;
2. determine subscribers' awareness of Airtel branding in Imo State;
3. determine the extent to which Airtel branding of services has influenced subscribers' patronage in Imo State;
4. identify services of Airtel which subscribers in Imo State patronise as a result of branding;

1.4 Research questions

The following research questions guided the researcher in this study:

1. What branding strategies are used by Airtel for subscribers' patronage of services in Imo State?
2. What is the level of subscribers' awareness of Airtel branding in Imo State?
3. To what extent has Airtel service branding influenced subscribers in Imo State?
4. What specific services of Airtel do subscribers in Imo State patronise as a result of branding?

2. Theoretical Perspective

2.1.1 Nicosia Theory

Nicosia theory focuses on the relationship between an organisation and its potential consumers. Francesco Nicosia propounded the theory in 1966 in the quest to decipher consumer motivation and behaviour in making purchase decisions. According to the theory, a consumer will show a confident attitude to an organisation's product or service after contact with the organisation's messages, which acts as the first influence on his/her predisposition. Based on the circumstance, the consumer creates a certain attitude towards the product or service. Emodi (2019) submits that consumers are becoming more intent in searching for information that can aid their buying decisions. Therefore, the consumer decision process focuses on the relationship between the organisation and its consumers. Aligning the tenets of the theory to practice, an organisation, through its communication programs, affects its customers, while the consumers, through their responses to the communication action, affect the future decisions of the organisation.

Based on the assertion above, the interactive nature of the Nicosia model suggests that each component acts as an input to the other. This means that the organisation and the consumer influence each other, whereby the organisation influences the consumer with its messages, while consumers in turn influence the organisation with their decisions. Runyon and Stewart (1987) while reviewing the theory, explain that the theory provides a refined attempt to show the interrelatedness between characteristics of the consumer, the communication strategies of an organisation, the consumer decision-making process, and feedback of the consumer to the organisation.

Explaining the theory further, Nicosia (1966) divided it into four main fields, one of which includes the organisation's attributes and the consumer's attitudes. This field is further divided into two subfields. The first subfield looks at an organisation's environment and communication efforts that influences consumer attitudes, the competitive environment, and the target market's characteristics. The second subfield examines the consumer characteristics such as personality, experience and perception. At this stage, the consumer forms his attitude toward an organisation's product or service based on his or her understanding of the message communicated by the organisation.

The second field of classification is the search and evaluation, in which the consumer initiates a search for products and services of other brands, evaluating that of the proposed organisation with other brands, and conceiving a motivation to act. In the end, the organisation motivates the consumer to purchase what it offers. The third field is of purchase action looks

at the outcome of motivation, which transcends into a decision that will convince the consumer to purchase the product or service from a specific retailer. The last field, feedback of sales results, evaluates the feedback of the organisation and the consumer after a purchase action has been made.

Analysing the fields, Anderson and Cunningham (1972) argues that the interactions between the four fields may occur in sequence or simultaneously. According to Anderson and Cunningham (1972) the process may also be initiated at any stage, either by the firm, consumer purchase experience, or failure to make a purchase. As seen in this theory, behaviour is adaptive as the actions of one variable influences that of the other, and in turn, future behaviours. The model is vital in showing the change in consumer attributes due to the experience of considering, choosing, purchasing, and using a product (Holloway & Hancock, 1973).

This study draws its assumptions from this theory as it shows that branding and its attributes form an organisation's communication strategies, which the organisation hopes would influence consumers into patronising what they offer. The Nicosia theory explains that the ultimate purpose of every promotion practice, such as branding, is to stimulate purchase responses from consumers.

2.1.2 The Howard-Sheth Model of Buying Behaviour

The Howard-Sheth Model of Buying Behaviour combines the various social, psychological and promotional influences on consumer choice into a sound information processing system. This theory was developed in 1969 by John Howard and Jagdish Sheth to explain how consumers, both industrial and personal patronise an organisation's products or services by understanding the messages relayed by the organisation (Agbonifoh et al., 2007). Howard and Sheth through this model, sought to explain consumer rationality while making brand purchase decisions. According to the scholars, there exists three levels of consumer decision making which includes extensive problem solving, limited problem solving and routinized problem solving.

The level of extensive problem solving refer to early stages of decision making in which consumers have little information about a brand and an underdeveloped criteria to choose among its products or services. In limited problem solving, consumers are presented with choice criteria where they have advanced information about brands but are undecided about which products that will best serve their needs while the routinized response behaviour explains that consumers have well defined choice criteria and have strong disposition toward the brand. They are faced with little or no confusion as to what brand to purchase from.

According to Orji (2013), the model in its simplest form consists of sets of elements including inputs, hypothetical constructs, exogenous and response variables. Furthermore, the Howard-Sheth Model of Buying Behaviour is founded on four assumptions. First, that consumer behaviour is caused by a stimulus or input variables; that a buyer's behaviour is rational within the constraints of information available; the involvement of specific processes in the selection of a brand by the buyer; that brand choice is systematic and is therefore observable.

Based on these assumptions, the model explains that input variables refer to information cues from the environment about available brands in the market. These information cues include price, distinctiveness, service and availability. It further explains that these cues that

provide information about a brand to the consumer may be significant, referring to information from the organisation, as well as dealing essentially with the brand characteristics. It can also be symbolic, in a mental form. This symbolic form includes verbal and visual characteristics of the brand which the consumer perceives about the products or services offered by the brand. The input variable can also emanate from social stimuli, which refer to information generated from the social environment through family, peer groups, and other members of society about a product or service offered by an organisation.

As observed by Howard and Sheth (1969), the hypothetical constructs are classified into two major groups, including perceptual constructs and learning constructs. These constructs deal with the psychological variables that control a consumer's decision when undergoing a thought process. The perceptual constructs analyse how a consumer obtains and processes information received from the input variables. For instance, when a consumer is exposed to brand messages, attention is stimulated. This attention towards the cue depends on the consumers' understanding of the information in terms of receptivity. However, a consumer may not process all information received, giving rise to perceived uncertainty, also known as stimulus ambiguity. Orji (2013) asserts that stimulus ambiguity occurs when a consumer does not understand the information disseminated in the environment, which gives way to bias. The consumer not only selectively attends to stimuli but sometimes distorts available information.

The model, while explaining learning constructs elucidates the consumer's learning process, formation of attitudes and opinions, including how he/she takes a final decision. It also explains certain motives that drive the consumer which include purchase, decision intermediaries, inclinations, and satisfaction. The motives are goals that a consumer seeks to attain through a purchase, including a compulsion towards action. With these in place, the consumer constructs a hierarchy of needs for the various alternatives or brands based on the chosen measures. More so, decision intermediaries are the criteria applied by the consumer when faced with making a purchase decision.

The model further explicates that response and exogenous variables include how consumers respond to input stimulus, including purchase action. These include attention, comprehension, attitude, intention and purchase. Exogenous variables such as environmental factors can restrain the purchase of a preferred brand. These factors include price, the financial status of the consumer, time, importance of the purchase, peer pressure, among others. Howard and Sheth's highlight on the importance of the various factors involved in the consumer decision process is one of the basis of this research.

For this research, the model explains how consumers process branding information of Airtel Nigeria. Going by the postulations of the model, it is assumed that subscribers of Airtel choose its services according to information (branding) they have received about the brand. Leveraging on the three levels of decision making as specified by the model, Airtel subscribers go for its services because they have a strong disposition about the brand. The theory supports the foundation of this research to ascertain the influence of Airtel branding on subscribers' patronage.

2.1.3 Understanding Branding

Brands are prevalent in every aspect of human life including production, consumption, personality, lifestyle, politics, health, telecommunications and others. A brand is a promise of

an experience, engaging a customer at an emotional level. Mikáčová and Rypáková (2014) hold the view that a brand is beyond marketing or advertising, programs, services and products offered by a business, but covers everything about an organisation including its culture, reputation, and core values. Brands are created, stimulated and applied by organisations who seek to create worthy experiences for their customers in order to induce a behaviour beneficial to the organisation. They are fashioned and amplified to suit consumers, who perceive relevant values that match their needs (Shariq, 2018). Balmer and Gray (2003), while explaining the idea that a brand involves a collection of promises, which revolves around its physical and emotional benefits to consumers, used the term 'brand covenant'. They posit that the brand's characteristics as a covenant are particularly appropriate for services because of their heterogeneity and intangibility, which sits on the brand's values including trustworthiness, honesty and integrity (Fan, 2005).

Branding is the series of deliberate choices adopted to connect an organisation to the environment. Fritz et al. (2017) posit that the concept has been discussed as a communication tool that supports firms to reach their goals and involves the advancement of all that relates to the business. The term branding comes from the Old Norse word '*Brandr*' which means to burn (Menon, 2016). The concept of branding was essentially to depict ownership, particularly things that have value. Keller (2013) asserts that branding began in the era of ancient pottery when stonemason's marks were put on handcrafted goods to identify the producer because pottery at that time was sold far from the craft shop where they were made. In the 16th to 18th century, branding was also used by Greeks and Romans on pottery jars to identify their offerings to their sacred gods. Farmers and herders used it as a means of identifying their livestock.

Branding is a vital feature to business. This is based on the fact that several businesses such as telecommunications companies offer similar products and services that meet like needs. With branding, organisations can create a distinct identity, distinguishing themselves from others. Branding is a dynamic and controlled process that yields valuable results for businesses when conducted with a combination of intellect, insight and creativity. Branding is innate to brands, because if left undefined, consumers will create their own interpretation of your brand, which can work against an organisation's ability to create a highly valuable asset in future. In tandem with the above assertion, Yeboah et al. (2017) submit that consumers attach meaning and interpretations to a brand due to the services or satisfaction it promises to deliver. According to Gbandi and Isibor (2022) organisations build recognition, credibility and trust with their target market using branding.

Ultimately, branding aims to build a unique identity that the public would trust and communicate to the audience that the organisation is what they need to solve a specific need. Successful brands give the possibility to resist the pressure of competitive price to businesses through the creation of stable demand. A strong brand means high market share, high sales and continuous profit (Menon, 2016). With branding, associations are created between the identity of the company, with the goal of driving loyalty and creating differentiation. Branding lends reliability to the products or services bought by the consumers and help them make the right purchase decisions.

2.1.4 Consumer Behaviour and Telecommunication Services

Consumers are individuals that purchase products or services. Consumer behaviour can simply be defined as all the deeds of a consumer in gathering information and making a purchase for goods, and services. Kotler and Keller (2016) define consumer behaviour as “the study of how individuals, groups and organisations select, buy, use, and dispose of goods, services, ideas, or experiences to satisfy their needs and wants,” (p. 179). Mohan et al. (2013) submit that consumer behaviour is interrelated with individual personality and economic variables. It aims to understand the consumer’s decision-making processes, both individually and collectively.

In an effort to comprehend people’s desires, consumer behaviour investigate aspects of individual consumers, including demographic and behavioural factors. It also tries to ascertain how organisations like families, friends, reference groups, and society at large affects the consumer. Over the years, individuals have engaged in consumer decision processes to acquire products and services. According to Engel et al. (1995), these decision processes, which are associated with specific consumer behaviours are in five stages to include motivation and need recognition, information search, alternatives evaluation, purchase decision and purchase, and purchase outcomes. As globalization set in with development, telecommunications has become more common, creating opportunities for both businesses and consumers. To solve a need, a consumer must first recognise the need and seek for ways to meet the desired need through an action.

Different factors can trigger a need such as branding, time, resources, product or service acquisition, and product or service consumption. Consumers exhibit several behaviours that allow telecommunications companies influence their motivation and need recognition process. For instance, some consumers indicate interest to receive messages about new offerings such as bonuses, tariff rates, and broadband services among others from their service providers. Others choose to automatically renew their data bundles at the end of a subscription to allow them stay connected online. With this behaviour, consumers have given the telecommunication company the opportunity to influence their decision processes and indirectly influencing their behaviour. Therefore, consumer behaviour towards telecommunication services is largely dependent on the consumer decision process, which ends with the decision to adopt a behaviour such as patronising a brand or not.

3. Methodology

The use of survey was the research design for the study. The population of the study was drawn from 1,134,000 subscribers of Airtel in Imo State. A sample size of 420 subscribers were drawn for the study using the Taro Yamane Formula while primary data for this study were obtained using the questionnaire.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Presentation of Data

Research Question One: What branding strategies are used by Airtel for subscribers' patronage of services in Imo State?

Table 4.1: Scores for respondents' view on Airtel branding strategies in Imo State

Statement	SA 4	A 3	D 2	SD 1	Total	WMS	Remark
I subscribe to Airtel because of the SMS reward that it offers	868	528	18	7	1421	3.5	Accepted
I subscribe to Airtel because of its advertisement	892	471	56	1	1420	3.4	Accepted
I patronise Airtel because it gives me data rewards when I subscribe to its data plans	616	708	24	7	1355	3.3	Accepted
Airtel as a foreign firm has aroused my interest and has encouraged me to purchase its services	772	627	14	0	1413	3.5	Accepted
Average weighted mean score						3.4	Accepted

Data presented in Table 4.3 show respondents' view on branding strategies such as communication, promo packages, easy recharge among others used by Airtel towards enhancing the patronage of subscribers in Imo State. All four items put forward for responses were accepted with an average mean score of 3.4. For instance, data from respondents show that they subscribed to Airtel services because of its brand communication and promotional packages it offers. This simply indicates that branding strategies used by Airtel for subscriber' patronage of services in Imo State were efficient in encouraging residents to patronise services of Airtel.

Research Question Two: What is the level of subscribers’ awareness of Airtel branding in Imo state?

Table 4.2: Scores for respondents’ awareness of Airtel branding

Statement	SA 4	A 3	D 2	SD 1	Total	WMS	Remark
Airtel services are cheap and this has made me patronise it	304	288	256	109	958	2.3	Rejected
The impression I have about Airtel in the area of service quality in Imo State is positive and it has encouraged me to patronise it	380	360	168	110	1018	2.5	Accepted
Airtel customer care treats subscribers with respect and resolves issues fast. This has made me buy and remain with Airtel	328	507	184	66	1085	2.6	Accepted
Average weighted mean score						2.5	Accepted

Data in Table 4.4 show the awareness of respondents to Airtel branding in Imo State. Out of three items put forward for responses, one was rejected. The average mean score was 2.5. The responses from subscribers show that they were aware of Airtel branding in Imo state.

Research Question Three: To what extent has Airtel service branding influenced subscribers in Imo State?

Table 4.3: Influence of Airtel service branding on respondents

Statement	S.A 4	A 3	D 2	S.D 1	Total	WMS	Remark
Airtel service information comes before the request is made and this has made me buy patronise it	544	345	240	38	1167	2.8	Accepted
Airtel network is slow and has poor Internet coverage in my community and this has reduced my interest in it.	842	269	126	46	1283	3.1	Accepted
I subscribe to Airtel services because of its access to other networks.	500	507	196	17	1220	2.9	Accepted
Activation of the Airtel data bundle is swift and has motivated me to remain with the brand	992	324	100	3	1419	3.5	Accepted

Average weighted mean score **2.9 Accepted**

Data presented in Table 4.5 show the influence of Airtel branding on subscribers. All the four items put forward for responses were accepted by respondents with an average mean weighted score of 2.9. This indicates that subscribers were influenced by Airtel branding in Imo State.

Research Question Four: What services of Airtel do subscribers in Imo State patronise as a result of its branding?

Table 4.4: Airtel services patronised by subscribers

Statement	S.A 4	A 3	D 2	S.D 1	Total	WMS	Remark
Airtel’s easy recharge is easy to use and has made me continue to shop services from the brand	1088	189	24	62	1363	3.3	Accepted
I subscribe to Airtel’s mobile data plans because their data lasts for a long time	280	597	202	39	1118	2.7	Accepted
Because of how Airtel has presented itself, I patronise their prepaid airtime	832	468	84	3	1387	3.4	Accepted
Average weighted mean score						3.3	Accepted

The result displayed in Table 4.6 reveals specific services that Airtel subscribers patronise as a result of Airtel branding. All the three items put forward for responses were accepted with an average weighted mean score of 3.3. This shows that subscribers patronised Airtel services because of the effectiveness of its branding on them.

4.2 Discussion of Findings

For research question one, four items were raised to address respondents view on branding strategies used by Airtel for subscribers’ patronage of its services in Imo State. Results obtained in table 4.1 showed that Airtel have branding strategies used for subscribers’ patronage. This is depicted with the average weighted mean score of 3.4. The overall finding showed that Airtel employed good and effective branding strategies for subscribers’ patronage of its services in Imo State. These strategies included communication, positioning and value. This implies that Airtel subscribers accepted that its advertisement, SMS rewards, data rewards, and brand origin motivated and encouraged them to patronise Airtel in Imo State. Shariq (2018) supports this by stating that, benefits motivate consumers to carry out a patronage action from a brand of choice. Result of this analysis is also in line with Jain (2017), who states that benefits encourage consumers into making patronage decisions. In conformity with results in table 4.3,

Dung et al (2022) maintain that the way a brand positions itself helps customers distinguish it from another. By this, customers perceive and think about it in a different light against competition in a market environment (Janiszewska & Insch, 2012).

For research question two, questions on table 4.2 were raised to solicit responses from respondents on subscribers' awareness of Airtel branding in Imo state. Results obtained showed that subscribers of Airtel in Imo State accepted that they are aware of the company's branding which has encouraged them recognise and patronise the brand as this is shown in the average weighted mean score of 2.5. This finding corroborates with Hestad (2013) who notes that branding helps individuals in purchasing a particular brand. Brand awareness supports potential buyers to remember a brand and what it offers. The result is also in line with Gbandi and Isibor's (2022) study which named brand awareness as the most vital component of the overall brand knowledge system in a consumer's mind that plays a role in consumer patronage decision. In agreement, Nguyen et al. (2011) maintain that awareness provides the anchor to which customers create associations with the brand, which in turn develops into loyalty. As posited by Menon (2016), consumers form associations with a brand by all means of communication they receive from it including the organisation's employees, public relations, quality of service, pricing, benefits, and competitive offerings, among others.

Findings on table 4.3 indicated that Airtel branding has greatly influenced subscribers in Imo State. The four items raised adequately showed respondents' opinion to this research question as this claim is supported by a weighted mean score of 2.9. The overall finding to research question three showed that Airtel service branding has an influence on subscribers which has led them to patronise the brand. This implies that respondents agreed that indices such as service information, access to other networks and swift activation of data bundles among others, encouraged them to buy from Airtel. In conformity with this finding, Nicosia theory notes that consumers form certain attitudes toward an organisation's product or service based on their understanding of the messages communicated by the organisation. However, poor service branding, such as Internet coverage in some areas have led to the dissatisfaction of some subscribers, thereby decreasing patronage in those areas. Sithole and Njaya (2018) are of the view that consumers will likely choose a new service provider if the network quality, coverage and clarity offered by a telecommunications business are inadequate. This is due to the fact that when choosing a service provider, consumers take network coverage into account. On this backdrop, Ofori et al (2015) note that if a service provider has a wide network coverage, consumers are more likely to switch to that network in order to experience vast coverage. Therefore, a key factor for Airtel in ensuring continued patronage and potential loyalty by subscribers is hinged on how satisfied they are with its network coverage.

Similarly, result in table 4.4 revealed showed that Airtel subscribers in Imo State patronise specific services from Airtel because of its branding. Result revealed that Airtel's easy recharge, brand presentation and meaning attracted and sustained subscribers' attention, and influenced them to patronise its products and services. Table 4.4 showed a weighted mean score of 3.3 to support the claim. The result agrees with Ehikwe's (2005) statement that branding is a fixation of a unique image to an organisation, product or service that makes it stand out from others in the eyes of consumers. How a brand presents itself is denoted in its image and a good image is one of the greatest assets the brand can possess. On presentation, Airtel has portrayed itself as a friendly organisation that supports smart devices. Nearly

everyone owns a smart device be it a personal computer, mobile phone, among others. Through brand presentation, Airtel has rolled out the smartphone friendly image and has reeled in subscribers who long for better services for their devices. With this, consumers have developed impressions from its actions to patronise its services. The result further agrees with the assertion by Yilmaz et al. (2017) that the perception of the consumers about a brand determines the success of its products and services, which extends to the brand's equity.

5. Summary, Conclusion and Recommendations

5.1 Findings

From the data presented and analysed, the study found out that:

- 1) Findings of the study showed that the branding strategies adopted by Airtel were effective for subscribers' patronage in Imo State as it showed that strategies such as brand communication, promotion packages including SMS rewards, data subscription rewards, among others were effective in encouraging subscribers to patronise Airtel services and equally remain loyal to it.
- 2) The study showed that the subscribers in Imo State are aware of Airtel branding and this has encouraged them to buy services from the brand.
- 3) It was also found out that factors such as slow network and poor Internet coverage of Airtel in some communities posed a challenge to the service quality image portrayed by the brand.
- 4) Findings of the study showed that subscribers in Imo State were satisfied with Airtel's services such as mobile data plans and prepaid airtime. As a result, these services led them to patronise the brand.

5.2 Conclusion

Having examined the influence of branding on subscriber's patronage of Airtel in Imo State, the study established that branding has an enormous effect on individuals and organisations who adopt it. Airtel has been able to sustain subscribers' patronage in Imo State through various branding strategies such as brand communication, promotion, positioning, and brand value among others. The study further concludes that the branding strategies adopted by Airtel have influenced subscribers to buy from them and remain loyal to its products and services. The study validates the Nicosia Theory and Howard-Sheth Model of Buyer Behaviour that consumer motivation and behaviour play roles in purchase decisions.

5.3 Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations were made:

1. Airtel should maintain and improve on branding strategies for its services to continue to sustain their desired position in Imo state and the telecommunications market in Nigeria.
2. Airtel should expand their coverage to improve challenging factors such as slow network, poor Internet coverage and mobile receptive service which could affect its image on the long run.
3. Airtel should rebrand its services from time to time to refresh subscribers' patronage and loyalty.

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