

RESEARCH ARTICLE

EXAMINING OPERATION-BASED TANGIBILIZATION FACTORS AND THEIR IMPACT ON PATRONAGE OF TELECOMMUNICATION PRODUCTS IN AKWA IBOM STATE, NIGERIA: A MULTIPLE REGRESSION ANALYSIS

Aniediabasi James Udom^{a*}, Samuel G. Etuk^b^aDepartment of Marketing, Heritage Polytechnic, Eket, Nigeria.^bDepartment of Marketing, University of Uyo, Uyo, Nigeria.*Corresponding Author Email: udom_aniedi@yahoo.com

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ABSTRACT

This research aims to examine the impact of operation-based tangibilization factors, such as the cleanliness of service stores, the physical appearance of employees, the visual appeals of service providers, the customer service store, and the visual appeal of materials associated with service providers, on the patronage of telecommunication products in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria. We established a research hypothesis to guide the study. The study employed a survey research design technique and gathered data from primary sources through the administration of a questionnaire. The respondents consisted of 384 individuals who were users of telecommunication products. The researchers utilised multiple regression analysis to examine the formulated hypothesis. The results of the study indicate a statistically significant relationship between the tangibility dimensions, including the neatness of the service store, employee physical appearance, the visual appeal of service providers' customer service stores, the visual appeal of materials associated with the service provider, and the patronage of telecommunication products in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria. A regression coefficient of 0.743 supports this relationship. Based on the findings and conclusions of this study, it is advisable to ensure that the physical environment, facilities, and infrastructure of the company consistently reflect the values and principles of the organisation.

KEYWORDS

Customer Satisfaction, Market Dynamics, Operational Efficiency, Service Quality

1. INTRODUCTION

Rising rivalry and reduced regulatory oversight in the business environment have prompted the service sector to develop creative tactics for product differentiation to (Hee et al., 2018). The increasing amount of regulation in the business environment causes this problem. The particular aspects of the environment in which enterprises are founded and run cause this phenomenon. There is a strong and direct link between success in this market and the efficient execution of high-quality service delivery. Offering high-quality service is often considered a prerequisite for long-term success and sustainability in today's highly competitive business world (Negi, 2009). Management and service delivery must be in sync for telecommunication firms (Bryson et al., 2020). This phenomenon ensures that management is on the same page as service delivery and increases general comprehension. There is a notable attempt made there to construct narratives focused on the services they provide. A fundamental component of this attempt is the use of three different tangibilization approaches to (Windsor et al., 2012). There are numerous processes that fall under the umbrella term "imagining." This category encompasses a variety of processes, such as association, representation, and imaging. One of the things that contribute to the underlying logic of this phenomenon is the distinct quality of the services being given. This assertion is almost certainly correct.

There has been a limited amount of research that has widely employed the five characteristics of SERVQUAL, which are tangibility, empathy, responsiveness, assurance, and reliability, as indicators of service quality. The primary objective of these studies has been to assess the impressions that consumers have regarding the quality of the service they receive by

analysing the disparity between their expectations and their actual experiences. The measurement that was used in this investigation, on the other hand, was founded on a confirmation paradigm rather than an attitude paradigm. Specifically, within the context of the Nigerian telecommunications business, this technique investigates the perceptions and expectations of customers. This study aimed to explore the importance of tangibilization evidence in the telecommunications business in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria aiming to address gaps identified in previous studies. The study specifically examined the cleanliness of service stores, the physical attractiveness of employees, the visual appeal of the customer service store owned by the service provider, and the visual appeal of items affiliated with the service provider. A paradigm based on attitudes was utilised in this study in order to investigate the influence that these elements have on the services that are provided by the industry.

This study investigates the possibility that there is no statistically significant correlation between a number of tangibility dimensions, such as how clean service stores are, how staff members appear, how visually appealing service providers' stores are, and how appealing service provider-related materials are. The study's goal is to determine whether these characteristics influence Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria inhabitants' use of telecommunication services in any way.

The purpose of this study is to investigate the interconnectedness between various aspects of tangibility and consumer preference for telecommunication products. More specifically, the study will focus on the cleanliness of service stores, the physical appearance of employees, the visual attractiveness of customer service stores owned by service providers, and the visual appeal of materials associated with service

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providers.

2. REVIEW OF RELATED CONCEPTS

Services can be categorised along a continuum, according to how well they can be experienced physically (Shostack, 2017). On one extreme of the spectrum are pure services, which are devoid of any components that are physically present. Conversely, pure products are devoid of any intangible elements from the outset. Numerous studies, have demonstrated that some services fall somewhere in the middle of the two extremes since they have both tangible and intangible components (Scheider and White, 2014; Lovelock and Wirtz, 2011; Bateson and Hoffman, 2011). Researchers in the early stages of service research used the distinction between products and services. Establishing services as a different field of study from manufacturing and identifying their unique characteristics were the objectives of this separation (Akehurst, 2008; Correa, Ellram, Scavarda, and Cooper, 2007).

There is a reciprocal relationship between goods and services to (Greenfield, 2012). The author highlights the close relationship and reciprocal reliance that these two abstract concepts have. He also, stressed how difficult it is to meet the need for certain services when there are no particular tangible goods available. In 1988, Vanadermerive and Rada introduced the notion of "servitization" for the first time. Nowadays, most people consider it to be a basic requirement when it comes to the industrial sector (Corrêa, 2017; Pawar et al., 2016).

2.1 Intangibility

It is without a doubt that, among the many features of service, intangibility stands out as a major and much-stressed component. In essence, this quality implies that services are not actual things but rather intangible activities that include actions rather than physical merchandise. It is widely known that services are intangible in nature, which makes it difficult to perceive them through sensory experiences such as sight, touch, taste, and physical ownership (Bateson and Hoffman, 2011. Kotler and Armstrong, 2010). This is because services are difficult to perceive through these activities. This characteristic is representative of the core characteristics of a service, but other distinctions may emerge as a consequence of this trait. There is distinction between physical intangibility, which refers to the inability to physically touch a service, and mental intangibility, which refers to the difficulties associated with intellectually comprehending a service (Bateson and Hoffman, 2011). Bielen and Sempels conducted an empirical investigation that provided support for this viewpoint (Edvardsson, 2015).

There are a number of services that do not exist until they are placed on the market. Furthermore, prior to making a purchase, customers have a tough time conducting a comprehensive examination or evaluation of this service. As a consequence of this phenomenon, it is difficult for customers to precisely anticipate the components of services that they will be experiencing, and it is also difficult for service providers to successfully communicate pre-purchase information to customers (Edvardsson, 2015).

It has been hypothesised that when the level of intangibility in a consumer's choice grows, it is more likely to be perceived as riskier and more difficult to evaluate (Lovelock and Gummerrsson, 2014). This is because consumers are more likely to be difficult to judge. Businesses focused on providing services must improve the tangibility of their products since service quality is typically judged based on tangible indications. It is required to make use of the method of utilising tangible evidence or indications of tangibility in order to complete this work. For example, it is necessary to examine the physical surroundings and observe the responses from employees (Bateson and Hoffman, 2011; Laroche et al., 2010). There are a few different ways that signals can present themselves in the field of telecommunications. One example of a prominent indicator is the existence of customer service centres that are staffed by friendly customer service representatives who are confident in their abilities to properly answer concerns raised by customers. Furthermore, the general appearance and cleanliness of these facilities also serve as cues.

Purchasers who make use of sophisticated services frequently have a lower level of competence when it comes to accurately evaluating the quality of the service to which they are about to commit to making a purchase (Wilson, 2008). The fact that pure services are distinguished by methods that primarily entail psychological experiences rather than physical possessions is something that should be emphasised once more (Schneider and White, 2014). It is of the utmost importance to keep in mind that the focus of measuring should not be just on tangible commodities but also on the psychological processes that are involved. As a result, acquiring customers' perceptions of the service becomes easier.

Intangibility can be varied to an extent that eases evaluation of performance (Corrêa, 2017). It has been recommended that the characteristics of intangibility makes it difficult to measure the quality of service. His argument was that tangibility or intangibility does not drive the assessment issue, but rather the extent to which it is easy or hard to measure the output of a service. These value packages that have a degree of difficulty and are low in relation to assessment require formulating a number of strategies compared to those with less assessment difficulty, irrespective of whether they are intangible or tangible (Correa, 2017).

2.2 Tangibilization

Tangibles also include the observable and physical aspects of a service. Firms should provide clients with tangible representations or visual depictions of their services. Firms can use these representations or depictions to evaluate quality, improve brand perception, ensure consistency, and demonstrate high standards (Li et al., 2022). Many businesses frequently combine one feature with another dimension in order to develop a plan for increasing service quality (Wilson, 2008). The process of making ethereal or less material offerings more palpable is known as tangibilization. Scholars often refer to it as "tangibility enhancement." Service tangibilization can be categorized into two: operation-based tangibilization (OBT) and marketing-based tangibilization (MBT) (Panda and Das, 2014). Panda and Das (2014) state that organizations use real-time technology to develop and consume the majority of services. The OBT strategy tries to make these types of activities more tangible for customers in order to lessen the inherent intangibility of service operations during consumer interactions. By merging a wide range of elements, such as consumer Expectations, Decision analysis, and Evaluation through Marketing activities (also known as EDEM), MBT makes the process of making ethereal conceptions more concrete. In this study, the indices of Operation-Based Tangibilization (OBT) for telecommunication service providers include tangibilization evidence such as the neatness of the service store, the physical appearance of employees, the visual appeal of the customer service store, and the visual appeal of materials associated with the service provider (Yadav and Sagar, 2021; Akishin, 2023).

2.3 Customer Patronage

Customer patronage can be examined from three different angles (Nwieve and Ateke, 2016). The three viewpoints are entirely planned, moderately planned, and unplanned. Moreover that patronage activity can be evaluated using three factors: patronage intention, patronage action, and repeat patronage (Nwulu and Asiegbu, 2015) This is contrary to the previous assertion. However, it is argued also that patronage intention, patronage action, and repeat patronage are three factors that can be used to evaluate patronage activity, contradicts the previous assertion (Nwulu and Asiegbu, 2015).

2.4 Empirical Framework

In the Indian state of Andhra Pradesh, Kouthoris and Alexandris (2013) studied the differences in service quality amongst the several cellular telephone service providers (Andhra Pradesh et al., 2013). The study's objective was to determine how much customers' real perceptions of the quality of the services they received differed from their expectations using the SERVQUAL approach. It is feasible to draw the conclusion that there are deficiencies in all aspects of service quality based on the study's findings. The study's findings determined that the largest gap existed in the feature of reliability, followed by the dimensions of tangibility, empathy, responsiveness, and assurance. The advice states that mobile telecom service providers ought to acknowledge the gap and take action to close it.

Sivesan (2012) conducted a study to examine the relationship between service quality and the number of customers attracted by the banking sector. The author used the SERVQUAL technique to measure the quality of the services. The study's subject population comprised people who were customers of private commercial banks in the Jafna Peninsula. The study found a strong correlation between a company's customer base and the level of service it provides. In order to increase customer loyalty, the study recommended that service providers focus on providing excellent customer service.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

3.1 The Grönroos Service Quality Model (1984)

As a one of the leaders in the Nordic school of service, says that while defining service quality, a customer-centric approach is required (Grönroos, 1984). The customer's appraisal of the quality of the services

they receive, as well as the factors that influence the quality of the services, is an important component of the service quality model. The method highlights the importance of the buyer-seller connection in a service setting as well as its importance to the end outcome. He asserts that customers determine the quality of service by assessing two elements: the anticipated service and the perceived service. The conclusion of this comparison procedure will then determine the perceived quality of the service. However, it is critical to note that this methodology only employs performance ratings to measure the quality of services; additionally, it understands the difficulties associated with evaluating client expectations on its own.

According to Grönroos (2006), performance evaluations have two main dimensions: a functional or process-related dimension and a technical or results-oriented one. Customers' views of a service are determined by the technical aspect (what the service produces) and the functional aspect (how the service is offered). Nonetheless, judging the latter is inherently subjective. Customer evaluations of a service's technical output are frequently, but not always, objective.

It is hypothesised that a third factor, the organisation's corporate image, may influence how successfully a corporation is perceived to provide services (Grönroos, 1984). A variety of elements, including the site's physical location, appearance, cost, external communications, technical and functional quality, and the behaviour and competency of the service organisation workers, could all have an impact on this image (Gbobadian et al., 2013). According to Grönroos (1984) when clients have a positive opinion of a company, possibly as a result of the above-mentioned characteristics, they tend to rationalise any shortcomings in terms of functionality or technical quality to (Grönroos, 1984). If the bad quality experience continues, the customer's opinion of the service provider will degrade. In a similar vein, a poor reputation may help exaggerate perceived problems with service quality. The reputation of the supplier can serve as a filter when evaluating the quality of a service (Grönroos, 1984; 2006).

Recognising the links between the many components of quality is critical. It is feasible to claim that achieving effective functional quality requires first establishing good technical quality. According to Grönroos' 1984 study, functional quality is more relevant in determining overall perceived service quality if the technical quality component is at an appropriate level. When there is a lack of technical quality, functional quality alone will not suffice to compensate (Czepie et al., 2015). According to the level of satisfaction with technical service quality has no effect on functional quality.

Based on earlier empirical and conceptual research as well as the state of knowledge regarding how service quality is perceived, six criteria is added to the model for evaluating perceived service quality (Grönroos, 1984). The author classifies each of the six criteria of the three-dimensional service quality model. Professionalism and talents are classified as a technical quality component first and foremost due to their outcome-related nature. An entity's reputation and trustworthiness determine how it is perceived and serve as a filtering mechanism. The final four criteria, which address the functional quality component, are: recovery, accessibility and flexibility, dependability and trustworthiness, and attitudes and conduct (Grönroos, 2006). These four criteria are all process-oriented.

The paradigm is widely recognised, particularly when it comes to how purchasers perceive quality (Grönroos, 1984; 2006). The model has been utilised by (Lasser et al., 2012; Kang and James, 2004). Nonetheless, the concept has received criticism, particularly in light of three major elements. The technical and functional quality criteria are insufficient to properly capture all of the components of a service (Bernardt and Shostack, 2008). Furthermore, it is argued that neither of the two aspects should be prioritised over the other. The fundamental criticism is that, due to its reliance on human interaction-based services, the model may be unable to properly integrate services that heavily rely on technology and physical components.

4. METHODOLOGY

During the course of the investigation, a survey research design was utilised. Additionally, this research design aligned with the natural nature of the study and facilitated the achievement of its goals. The study determined that the population included all telephone subscribers in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria who use various telecommunication products. The researchers believed that the population that would be thier subject of his investigation was unlimited, and the methodology that was presented by Thames (1996) utilised to determine the size of the sample.

As a result of this strategy, the researchers utilized the convenience sampling method to select 384 respondents.

Primary sources provided the data through survey questionnaires in the form of copies. The researchers provided these questionnaires to the respondents. Descriptive statistics, specifically frequency distribution and percentage tables, were utilised in order to conduct an analysis on the data that was obtained. Furthermore, we conducted a multiple regression analysis with a significance level of 0.05 to evaluate the hypothesis.

5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A total of 384 questionnaires were distributed to the individuals who participated in the study during this research project. Researchers discovered that 313 forms were returned and verified that they were filled out correctly. This constitutes 81.5% of the total survey responses. Presented below are the findings that pertain to the demographics of the individuals that participated in the survey:

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of the Respondents		
Variables	No. of Respondents	Percentages (%)
Gender		
Male	176	56.2
Female	137	43.8
Total	313	100.0
Age		
20-30years	104	33.2
31-40years	102	32.6
41-50years	63	20.1
Above 50 years	44	14.1
Total	313	100.0
Patronage		
1-5years	109	34.8
6-10years	102	32.6
Above 10years	73	23.3
Total	313	100.0
Educational Level		
NCE/ND	118	37.7
B.Sc/ B.A/HND	119	38.0
M.A/MBA/ MSc.	49	15.7
PhD	27	8.6
Total	313	100.0

Source: Field Survey, (2023).

According to the information that is shown in Table 1, there were a total of 313 individuals that took part in the research programme. Out of these participants, 176 individuals, which constitute 56.2% of the sample, identified themselves as male, whereas 137 persons, which constitute 43.8% of the sample, identified themselves as female. In addition, the findings demonstrate that 124 of the participants, which constitute 33.2% of the sample, were between the ages of 20 and 30 years old. In addition, there were 102 respondents who were between the ages of 31 and 40, which accounts for 32.6% of the total surveyed population. Twenty-one percent of the total responses were members of the demographic group, which consisted of 63 people between the ages of 41 and 50. Moreover, the group of individuals aged fifty and over had forty-four people, which accounted for fourteen percent of the total respondents. Furthermore, a total of 109 respondents, which constitutes 34.8% of the sample, have been working with the company for a period of time that ranges from one to five years. To a similar extent, 131 of the respondents, which accounts for 41.9% of the sample, have been customers of the company for a period of time ranging from six to ten years. Additionally, an additional 73 respondents, which accounts for 23.3% of the sample, have maintained a commercial relationship with the organisation for a period of time that is greater than ten years. In accordance with the findings of the research that was carried out, it was discovered that 118 people, which constitutes 37.7% of the total respondents, possessed National Diploma / National Certificate for Education (ND / NCE) qualifications. In addition, 134 of the respondents, which accounts for 38.0% of the sample, held degrees in the fields of Bachelor of Science (BSc.), Bachelor of Arts (B.A.), or Higher National Diploma (HND). In addition, 49 participants, which accounts for 15.7% of the total responses, were in possession of a Master of Arts (M.A), Master of Business Administration (MBA), or Master of Science degree (MSc.). The percentage of people who held a Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D)

degree was 8.6%, representing 27 people, overall. According to the findings of the aforementioned research, the participants demonstrated a level of maturity that permitted them to comprehend the subject matter at hand and provided comments that were appropriate. Due to the fact that the research is centred on issues that are associated with gender, the data

also revealed that there is a balanced representation of both male and female participants. Additionally, all of the individuals who participated in the survey indicated that they had a sufficient level of experience in the utilisation of telecommunications products, which enabled them to submit responses that were pertinent to the study question.

Table 2: Summary of Multiple Regression Analysis of Tangibility Dimension and Patronage of Telecommunication Products

Variable	Beta Estimate (β)	Standard Error	T score	P value	Remark
Constant (α)	24.480	5.378	4.552	0.000	
Neatness of Service store.	0.182	0.082	2.220	0.000	Significant
Employee physical appearance.	0.214	0.093	2.301	0.043	Significant
Visual appeal of service providers' customer service store.	0.316	0.122	2.590	0.000	Significant
Visual appeal of materials associated with service provider.	0.133	0.059	2.254	0.014	Significant
R²	0.766				
Adjusted R²	0.743				
Std Error of Estimate	0.402				
F- Statistics	1004.924				

Dependent variable = Patronage (Researcher's Computation from field data (2023)).

The regression analysis yielded a corrected R-square value of 0.743, as indicated by the findings presented in Table 2. The findings indicate that the tangibility variables investigated in this study account for 74.30% of the variance in the patronage of telecommunication products. The statistical approach known as analysis of variance (ANOVA) was utilised to validate the presence of a large effect [$F = 1004.924$, $p < .005$]. The obtained results reject the null hypothesis. It appears from this that there is a correlation that is statistically significant between a number of different tangibility factors. These factors include the cleanliness of service stores, the physical appearance of employees, the visual appeal of service providers' stores, and the visual appeal of materials associated with the service provider. According to the aforementioned findings, these elements influence the consumer's decision to purchase telecommunications products in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria.

An additional indication of the significant influence that tangibility dimensions have was supplied by the standardised coefficients of the beta weights. All dimensions of tangibility significantly influenced the patronage of telecommunication products ($p < 0.05$). The study found that the visual appeal of the customer service store of service providers had the most significant influence on predicting patronage of telecommunication products in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria ($\beta = 0.316$, $t = 2.590$, $p < 0.05$). This shows that an increase of one unit in the resources allocated by telecommunication service providers will lead to a 0.316 improvement in the utilisation of telecommunication products in the state of Akwa Ibom due to the fact that the utilisation of these products will increase.

The regression analysis aimed to investigate the connection between the tangibility of telecommunications products and their level of customer patronage. The findings of the analysis not only suggested a large impact level of 74.34 %, but they also indicated that the results were statistically significant. According to Pawar, Baltagui, and Riedel (2009), who suggested that the tangibility component of service quality has a substantial impact on the consumer's decision to utilise telecommunication products, this finding is in agreement with their opinion. According to their perspective, when a service is tangible, it undergoes a metamorphosis where its intangible nature decreases, and it becomes visually and physically appealing to the user. In the end, this transition helps to contribute to a higher level of satisfaction among customers. Additionally, the writers elaborated on the fact that the process of "tangibilizing" service is considered to be an essential step in the process of obtaining success in the service organisation. According to it was found that customers are able to form a strong connection with tangible features of an organisation, such as the physical appearance of facilities, equipment, personnel, and communication materials (Edvardsson, 2015). Research has revealed this connection. Customers are able to form a strong connection with the tangible components of the dimensions of tangibility, as the speaker explained their ability to do so. Specifically, this is because of the specific characteristics of the delivery of telecommunication services, which include the fact that services can be given and consumed without the consumer and the service provider having direct contact with one another. These tangible features, being visible and touchable, symbolize the consumer's knowledge of the

business. An additional clarification was offered by the individual, which stated that the successful use of these characteristics will make a significant contribution to the adoption and utilisation of telecommunication solutions.

6. CONCLUSION

The study found that a variety of physical aspects of service delivery, such as staff appearance, cleanliness of the service store, visual appeal of the customer service store, and visually appealing materials related to the service provider, are significant predictors of consumer preference for telecommunication products in Akwa Inom State, Nigeria. This study provides a thorough examination of the relationship between client preferences and tangibility traits, revealing how these elements interact to encourage product patronage.

The findings emphasise the importance of tangibility aspects in customers' decisions to use telecommunications technologies. The empirical findings of this study reveal that the material components of a service go beyond outward appearances since they embody the soul of the business and have a substantial influence on the overall customer journey.

The elements that aid in the tangibilization of operational-based services heavily influence customers' attitudes and preferences in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria. The aesthetic appeal of service provider-run customer service outlets is an essential factor in forecasting consumer patronage. This emphasises the importance of providing a friendly and appealing physical environment for customers, where elements such as personnel appearance, cleanliness, and general aesthetic appeal all contribute to a pleasant customer experience.

Based on the findings of these study it is recommended amongst others that, Telecommunication services marketers must continually prioritise the physical environment, facilities, and infrastructure in order for the firm's beliefs and identity to be adequately reflected, as this will boost customer loyalty. This includes keeping service sites clean, improving the appearance of staff uniforms, and investing in making customer service facilities and associated goods more aesthetically pleasing.

Moreover, Telecommunications service providers can develop good relationships with their clients by ensuring that the operational components of their business coincide with the company's basic ideals. This relationship extends beyond the functional components of the services provided to include emotional and experiential fulfilment. A great and tangible customer experience is crucial not only for attracting new business but also for instilling loyalty in current consumers.

Furthermore, putting a higher emphasis on the tangibility of operational-based services from a strategic perspective may increase telecommunication companies' overall competitive edge. Within industries characterised by intangible products or services, a company might become distinct and long-lasting by deliberately emphasising and improving its concrete attributes.

This study adds to our understanding of the relationship between tangibility qualities and consumer behaviour. It also offers helpful recommendations on how telecommunication firms in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria may improve their services and build long-term connections with their customers.

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