



WORD-OF-MOUTH COMMUNICATION AND CUSTOMER PATRONAGE BEHAVIOUR TOWARDS SMARTPHONES

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ABSTRACT: *Words are perceived to be powerful, especially in the viral digital age of today. This study focused on investigating the effect of word-of-mouth communication on customer patronage behavior towards smartphones. The specific factors examined were customer referral, celebrity endorsement, and social media. A cross-sectional survey research design was employed to gather primary data from 276 smartphone users, who responded to a 5-point Likert scale questionnaire. The collected data underwent analysis using descriptive statistics and inferential statistics, specifically multiple linear regression, conducted in the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS 23). The results indicated that customer referral, celebrity endorsement, and social media exerted significant positive influences on customer patronage behavior towards smartphones. Consequently, we suggest that smartphone marketers should implement incentive programs, capitalize on celebrity endorsements, and utilize social media platforms to attract new customers and foster positive recommendations for smartphone brands. From the limitations of this study, we proposed theoretical directions for future research.*

KEYWORDS: Word-Of-Mouth Marketing, Customer Patronage Behaviour, Smartphone, Customer Referral, Celebrity Endorsement



INTRODUCTION

Customer patronage behaviour is a fundamental aspect of marketing because it determines customers' knowledge, perception, attitudes and response towards companies' products and services. Consequently, companies often apply various marketing strategies to positively influence consumer buying behaviour towards their offerings (Maniatis, 2016; Etim et al., 2021; Etuk et al., 2022). Word-of-mouth communication is one such marketing strategy adopted by companies to exert influence on consumer buying behaviour (Huete-Alcocer, 2017; James & Inyang, 2022; Anyadighibe et al., 2021). According to Hernández-Méndez et al. (2015), word-of-mouth communication is the communication of information about a company's products and services from one person to another to either recommend or discourage patronage. It is an innovative marketing strategy business firms use to persuade and influence consumer purchase behaviour in favour of their brands. This strategy can be applied in a number of ways, including customer referral, social media communication, celebrity endorsement, brand ambassadorship, viral marketing, and opinion leader marketing, among others (Shi et al., 2016; Etuk et al., 2021; Etuk et al., 2022; Etim et al., 2021). However, this study centered on customer referral, celebrity endorsement and social media aspects of word-of-mouth communication. Customer referral is a system of marketing that motivates and encourages existing customers to refer new customers, usually friends and family, coworkers, colleagues and neighbours, to patronize organizations through positive recommendations (Stein & Ramaseshan, 2015; Inyang et al., 2022; James & Inyang, 2023). Celebrity endorsement is a form of advertising campaign that involves a well-known person with a huge active population of followers using their fame to help promote a product or service by speaking positively about them (Gauns et al., 2018; Etuk et al., 2022). Social media is a collection of internet-based and operated tools that enable and facilitate individual and group communication and the exchange of information between and among registered users (Stephen, 2016; James et al., 2022).

Companies use customer referral strategies by rewarding and encouraging existing customers to introduce their offerings to others through positive reviews and testimonials in a bid to improve customer patronage of those offerings. Smartphone dealers in Nigeria, such as Tecno, Infinix and Samsung, have been observed to recruit and hire famous musicians, footballers and entertainers to endorse their brands and increase sales. Similarly, social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, YouTube and TikTok are increasingly being adopted by smartphone manufacturers in Nigeria as a means of promoting their products to customers. The problem of this study is that it is unclear whether or not these word-of-mouth communication strategies have actually improved customer patronage behaviour towards smartphone brands in Nigeria. This problem persists because even though several studies have confirmed the existence of a positive influence of word-of-mouth communications on customer patronage of fast-moving consumer goods (Dost et al., 2019), cosmetics (Kurniawati, 2020), retail stores (Lin & Heng, 2015), hotels (Sijoria et al., 2019) and fashion clothing (Loureiro et al., 2018), there is insufficient empirical evidence to demonstrate the causality between word-of-mouth communication and customer patronage of smartphones, particularly in Nigeria. This necessitates the need for studies that particularly explore the causal relationship between word-of-mouth communication and customer patronage behaviour towards smartphone brands. This study was therefore motivated by this foregoing empirical reality. The emphasis, therefore, was to assess the influence of word-of-mouth communication strategies such as customer referral, celebrity endorsement and social media on customer patronage behaviour towards smartphones in Nigeria.



LITERATURE REVIEW

Word-of-mouth communication

The process of word-of-mouth communication involves individuals or groups exchanging information about a specific organisation, its products, and services. This exchange typically leads to either a positive recommendation for customers to patronise or a discouragement from patronising the organisation (Abu-Nadeen, 2017; James & Inyang, 2022; Inyang & James, 2022). The participants in this communication may or may not be customers themselves, and their knowledge may come from personal experiences with the organisation, information shared by friends, colleagues, or personal groups, or from the organisation's promotional campaigns. It is important to note that the participants, including the source, are not employees of the organisation, nor are they hired or incentivised to promote its products and services. Emily and Saunders (2020) support these viewpoints by emphasising that an organisation like advertising does not sponsor word-of-mouth communication but occurs naturally as consumers tend to discuss their positive or negative experiences with products and services. This consumer inclination to share information about their experiences sets the foundation for the development and sharing of word-of-mouth information (Etim et al., 2023; Etim et al., 2020; Etuk et al., 2022).

Also, Ramajudeen (2018) suggests that in modern times, businesses have actively engaged in efforts to generate and disseminate word-of-mouth communication in order to promote their products and services. They often encourage existing customers, family members, friends, peers, influential opinion leaders, and celebrities to speak favourably about their offerings to boost sales effectively. This type of company-supported word-of-mouth communication aims to elicit positive reactions from customers (Anyadighibe et al., 2022; Etim et al., 2023; Inyang et al., 2022). Thus, it can be inferred from scholarly perspectives on word-of-mouth communication that it is a two-fold phenomenon that can occur naturally or be stimulated by organisations in subtle ways. Therefore, Shekire and Raheem (2015) provide a comprehensive definition of word-of-mouth communication that encompasses its fundamental forms. According to their definition, word-of-mouth communication is either a naturally occurring or company-initiated communication among individuals about an organisation's offerings, aiming to either recommend or discourage patronage by others. Sánchez-Casado et al. (2019) further explain that word-of-mouth communication utilises people with whom customers have personal relationships or individuals they admire, respect, and look up to as communication channels. This reinforces and enhances the authenticity and credibility of the communication, thereby increasing its potential to elicit positive responses from the target audiences (Etuk et al., 2022).

Consumer buying behaviour

Consumer buying behaviour is the sum total of a consumer's attitudes, preferences, intentions, and purchase-related decisions in the marketplace towards goods and services he expects to satisfy his needs (Craig, 2015). Consumer behaviour studies draw upon various social science disciplines such as anthropology, psychology, sociology, and economics. The author maintains that consumer buying behaviour is the process by which individuals search for, select, purchase, use, and dispose of goods and services for the purpose of satisfying their needs and wants. Yakup and Sabastian (2012) define consumer behaviour as the study of individuals, groups, or organisations and the processes they use to select, secure, use and dispose of products, services, experiences or ideas in order to satisfy their needs and wants. It is the process of searching, organising, evaluating, using and disposing of goods to satisfy consumer needs and wants. Hence, consumer behaviour simply refers to the study of whom,



why, how, and where people buy or do not buy a product. In the view of Fullerton (2013), consumer behaviour is the study of individuals, groups, or organisations and all the activities associated with purchasing, using and disposing of goods and services, including the consumer's emotional, mental and behavioural responses that precede or follow these activities. It examines how emotions, attitudes and preferences affect buying behaviour. The author further asserts that characteristics of individual consumers such as demographics, personality lifestyles and behavioural variables such as usage rates, usage occasion, loyalty, brand advocacy, and willingness to provide referrals, in an attempt to understand people's wants and consumption are all investigated in formal studies of consumer behaviour. The study of consumer behaviour also investigates the influences, on the consumer, from groups such as family, friends, sports, reference groups, and society in general (Siddiqui & Agarwal, 2017; Awara et al., 2021).

Customer Referral and Customer Patronage Behaviour

Customer referral is when an existing customer recommends giving brands to their friends, family, colleagues, or peers to encourage patronage (Sánchez-Casado et al., 2019). It is any peer-to-peer communication about companies' products and services to influence peer members to patronise the companies. In a simple sense, customer referral is the process whereby an existing product user formally or informally advises their friends, family, colleagues and social associates to purchase and use a particular brand based on their experience and recommendations. According to Bulte et al. (2018), customer referral occurs mostly from a satisfied customer who has enjoyed a remarkable experience with a company's brand. Naturally, they are more likely to tell others about the awesome products or services that they have tried with the intention of leading them to patronise the company. Conversely, when customers are dissatisfied with a firm's products or services, they tend to spread negative word-of-mouth communication to discourage their friends, family, colleagues and others from doing the same. This is why companies need to prioritise the production and delivery of high-quality products in the first place to accelerate the chances of obtaining positive recommendations from existing customers (Berman, 2019; Etim et al., 2023; Mpuon et al., 2023). Similarly, Roy et al. (2019) maintained that Whichever way it is executed, customer referral has an extremely powerful influence on consumers' psychology because the recommendation comes from well-known and trusted friends, family or colleagues. This is opposed to recommendations from the company's advertising sources, which are already known to customers to be paid for. Given the high credibility and trustworthiness of the peer-to-peer recommendation, it is more likely to generate sales and encourage customer patronage than paid advertising. The foregoing viewpoint suggests that customer referral has the capacity to increase customer patronage of products like smartphones substantially. This viewpoint is supported by the study of Emily and Saunders (2020), which revealed that customer referral programmes significantly influenced customer patronage of retail stores in South Carolina. The viewpoint is also reinforced by the study of Adjertey and Annang (2017), which revealed that customer referral programmes significantly improved customer patronage of commercial banks in East Legon, Ghana. On this basis, we propose the following hypothesis:

H₁: Customer referral has a significant effect on customer patronage behaviour towards smartphones.



Celebrity endorsement and customer patronage behaviour

Celebrity endorsement refers to a marketing strategy whose purpose is to use one or multiple celebrities to advertise a specific product or service (Knepper, 2017; Mpuon et al., 2023). The primary goal, in this case, is to reach a greater audience represented by the celebrity's fan base. In the view of Bhasin (2018), celebrity endorsement is the use of celebrities by advertisers as spokespeople for their brands. This is done due to the perception that messages conveyed by attractive or well-known sources can increase retention and recall (Wentworth, 2019). Recognising the potency of the power of celebrities, marketing companies around the world are rapidly recruiting popular celebrities from the entertainment, sports, music, and film industries to promote their brands to loyal followers (Gauns et al., 2018). In so doing, marketers are seeking to exploit the social, psychological and emotional bonds between celebrities and their followers to advance their commercial gains. This is effective because loyal followers of celebrities are most likely to adopt products and use services that their favourite celebrities promote in an attempt to shape their lives after the celebrities. This link may be emotional, psychological and social, but it is very powerful and difficult to overlook. Instead, marketing companies have sought to exploit it by contracting celebrities to promote brands to followers to encourage brand patronage (Osei-Frimpong et al., 2019). This viewpoint is hence reinforced by the study of Emily and Saunders (2020), which revealed that celebrity endorsement significantly influenced customer patronage of retail stores in South Carolina. The viewpoint is also supported by the study of Jefferson and Miller (2021), which revealed that celebrity endorsement had a significant positive relationship with customer purchase of automobiles in Colorado. On this basis, we propose the following hypothesis:

H₂: Celebrity endorsement has a significant effect on customer patronage behaviour towards smartphones.

Social Media and Customer Patronage Behaviour

Social media is a collection of online communications channels dedicated to community-based input, interaction, content-sharing and collaboration (Strauss & Frost, 2018). It includes interactive computer-mediated technologies that facilitate creating and sharing of information, ideas, career interests and other forms of expression via virtual communities and networks. By design, social media is internet based and offers users easy electronic communication of personal information and other content, such as videos and photos (Carr & Hayes, 2015; Mpuon et al., 2021). Nisrina (2019) observed that the emergence of social media tools (such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and YouTube) has created platforms for individuals and organisations to create or shape certain behavioural tendencies in their audiences by enabling the rapid, far-reaching, and widespread dissemination of messages and other contents from the comfort of their homes or business places. Fuchs (2021) added that the power of social media is as boundless as its reach. It has been harnessed by business organisations around the globe to reach, connect and influence the behaviour of customers at an enormous speed. According to Agnihotri (2020), increasingly, social media is becoming an indispensable marketing tool business organisations use for a large spectrum of marketing tasks, including promotion, customer service and sales. Using social media networks, communities and platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube, among others, companies have been able to launch creative advertising campaigns to build market awareness about their brands. Also, Dolega et al. (2021) asserted that by facilitating the creation and dissemination of promotional content such as text, images, video and documents, social media is a potent marketing vehicle for companies to drive sales and customer patronage of their offerings. This viewpoint is reinforced by the study of Abraham et al. (2018), which revealed that social media had a significant positive impact



on consumer buying behaviour (customer awareness and patronage) towards energy drinks in Nairobi, Kenya. The viewpoint is also supported by the study of Gretchen (2019), which revealed that social media marketing (Facebook, Twitter and YouTube) significantly positively affected guests' patronage of hotel services in Seychelles. On this basis, we propose the following hypothesis:

H₃: Social media has a significant effect on customer patronage behaviour towards smartphones.

Theoretical framework

The theoretical underpinning of this study is the social influence theory, propounded by Kelman (1958). This theory is considered relevant to this study because it explains the processes through which smartphone brands use word-of-mouth marketing to influence and shape consumers' purchase behaviour towards their products. The social influence theory posits that others influence an individual's attitudes, beliefs, and actions through three main processes: compliance, identification, and internalisation (Kelman, 1958). Social influence can take many forms, such as conformity, peer pressure, obedience, persuasion, and leadership, and can be seen in various social environments, including marketing and sales. The theory highlights the importance of social environments and individuals in shaping attitudes, behaviours, and actions and emphasises the different levels at which social influence can occur (Naeem, 2020). Overall, the social influence theory provides valuable insights into understanding how individuals are influenced by their social contexts. In the context of this study, the social influence theory is relevant to this study because it makes assumptions that resonate with the purpose of this study. This study examined the effect of word-of-mouth communication on customer patronage behaviour towards smartphones. In that sense, the social influence theory asserts that social interactions and communications in the marketplace could influence the beliefs, attitudes and perceptions of customers towards smartphone brands. The theory further implies that social interactions like customer referral, celebrity endorsement and social media could influence customers' purchase behaviour towards smartphone brands. Furthermore, it can be deduced from the social influence theory that word-of-mouth communications are social forces that have the potential to shape and/or influence consumers' purchase behaviour towards smartphone brands. Therefore, the hypotheses of this study sought to verify the relevance of the social influence theory by testing whether or not word-of-mouth communications (customer referral, celebrity endorsement and social media) significantly influenced customer patronage behaviour towards smartphones.

Empirical review and model conceptualisation

Emily and Saunders (2020) examined "the effect of word-of-mouth marketing on customer patronage of retail stores in South Carolina". The objective of the study was to investigate the effect of word-of-mouth marketing strategies (celebrity endorsement, customer referral programme, and electronic-based word-of-mouth) influenced customer patronage of retail stores in South Carolina. A questionnaire was used to collect primary data from 148 retail customers in South Carolina, and Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficients were used to analyse the data. Consequently, it was found that celebrity endorsement, customer referral programmes, and electronic-based word-of-mouth significantly influenced customer patronage of retail stores in South Carolina. On the basis of this, the study concluded that word-of-mouth marketing strategies significantly enhanced customer patronage of retail stores in South Carolina. However, the limitation of this study, in the context of the present study, is that it centred overwhelmingly on retail stores in South Carolina, with no emphasis on customer patronage behaviour towards smartphones in Nigeria.



Another study by Adjertey and Annang (2017) examined the “Effect of customer referral marketing programme on the marketing performance of commercial banks in East Legon, Ghana”. The study collected primary data from 5 commercial banks in East Legon and applied multiple regression in the statistical package for the social sciences (SPSS) to analyse the data collected. Consequently, it was revealed that the customer referral programme significantly had an effect on the marketing performance (customer patronage, customer account opening, customer retention and profitability) of commercial banks in East Legon, Ghana. The limitation of this study is that it addressed just one dimension of word-of-mouth communication, which is customer referral, and it is overwhelmingly centred on commercial banks in Ghana. It does not address the peculiarities of the Nigerian market as it relates to customer patronage behaviour towards smartphone brands.

Similarly, Abraham et al. (2018) examined the “Impact of word-of-mouth marketing on consumer buying behaviour towards new energy drinks in Nairobi, Kenya”. The study aimed at determining the impact of celebrity endorsement, referral marketing, social media and internet marketing on consumer buying behaviour (customer awareness and patronage) towards energy drinks in Nairobi, Kenya. Primary data was collected from 108 consumers of selected energy drinks in Nairobi using a structured questionnaire. Data were analysed using simple regression in the statistical package for the social sciences (SPSS). It was found that celebrity endorsement, referral marketing, social media and internet marketing significantly positively impacted consumer buying behaviour (customer awareness and patronage) towards energy drinks in Nairobi, Kenya. However, the limitation of this study, in the context of the present study, is that it centred overwhelmingly on beverages in Kenya, with no emphasis on customer patronage behaviour towards smartphones in Nigeria.

Also, a study by Jefferson and Miller (2021) investigated “Celebrity endorsement and customer purchase of automobiles in Colorado”. Primary data was collected using a questionnaire from 87 respondents in Colorado. Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficients were employed for the analysis of data. Consequently, it was found that celebrity endorsement significantly influenced the purchase of automobiles among residents of Colorado. Therefore, the study established the existence of a significant relationship between celebrity endorsement and customer purchase of automobiles in Colorado. However, the limitation of this study is that it addressed just one dimension of word-of-mouth communication, which is celebrity endorsement, and it is overwhelmingly centered on automobiles in Colorado. It does not address the peculiarities of the Nigerian market as it relates to customer patronage behaviour towards smartphone brands.

Furthermore, Gretchen (2019) examined the “Effect of social media marketing on guests’ patronage of hotel services in Seychelles”. The study aimed to ascertain the effect of social media marketing (Facebook, Twitter and YouTube) on guests’ patronage of hotel services in Seychelles. Primary data was collected from 128 hotel guests and analysed using simple percentages and frequency tables. Subsequently, it was found that social media marketing (Facebook, Twitter and YouTube) significantly positively affected guests’ patronage of hotel services in Seychelles. The study also found that 85 per cent of hotel guests became aware of and decided to patronise hotels based on social media communications received. However, the limitation of this study is that it addressed just one dimension of word-of-mouth communication, which is social media, and it is overwhelmingly centred on hotels in Seychelles. It does not address the peculiarities of the Nigerian market as it relates to customer patronage behaviour towards smartphone brands.

Another study by Chinedu (2022) examined the influence of “Electronic word of mouth and consumer behaviour towards fast food outlet in Port Harcourt, Nigeria”. The study used a structured questionnaire to obtain primary data from 233 staff of selected fast-food outlets in Port Harcourt.



The data obtained were analysed and interpreted using descriptive statistics, while the hypotheses were tested using Pearson's product-moment correlation. The findings of the study revealed that information, trustworthiness and expertise had significant positive relationships with customers' preference of customers towards fast food outlets. While the study was carried out in Nigeria, as is the present study, it is overwhelmingly limited to fast food restaurants, and it does not address the peculiarities of the Nigerian technology market as it relates to customer patronage behaviour towards smartphone brands.

Similarly, another study by Patterson et al. (2018) examined the "Influence of word-of-mouth on customer loyalty to social commerce websites" in Australia. A cross-sectional survey research design was adopted. A structured questionnaire was used to collect primary data from 1000 participants of social commerce websites in Australia. The data was analysed using Structured Equation Modeling. The findings revealed that viral marketing, amplified word of mouth, organic word of mouth and social media marketing significantly influenced customer loyalty to social commerce websites in Australia. Therefore, the study concluded that word-of-mouth significantly affected customer loyalty to social commerce websites in Australia. However, the limitation of this study is that it centres overwhelmingly on social commerce websites in Australia, and it does not address the influences of word-of-mouth variables such as customer referral, celebrity endorsements and social media on customer patronage of smartphones.

Informed by a review of existing literature, this study adopted customer referral, celebrity endorsement and social media as proxies of word-of-mouth communication. In contrast, customer patronage behaviour was measured through proxies such as customer preference, customer purchase and repeat purchase. In light of existing empirical evidence by previous researchers, this study hypothesised that word-of-mouth communication is related to customer patronage behaviour towards smartphones. To demonstrate the hypothesised relationship between the study variables, a conceptual model in Fig. 1 was adapted from existing studies to suit the context of the present study.

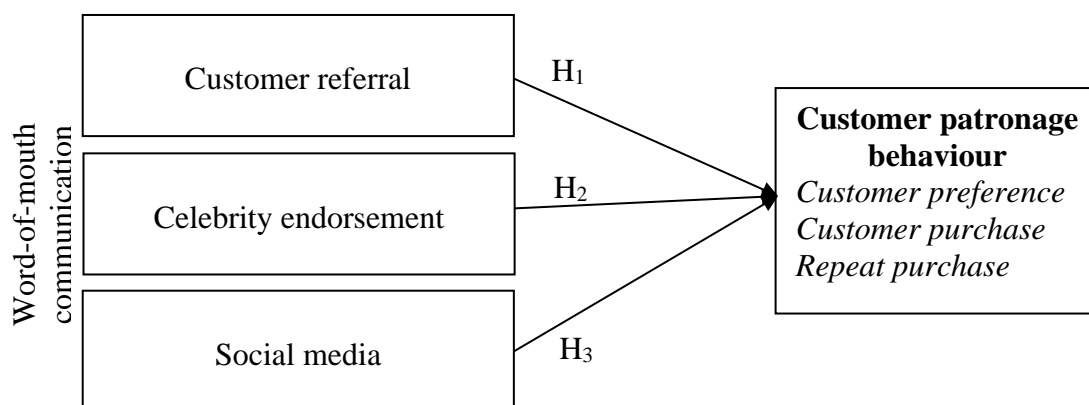


FIG. 1: Conceptual model of the study

Source: Independent variables adapted from: Emily and Saunders (2020); Adjertey and Annang (2017); Abraham et al. (2018). Dependent variable adapted from Anyadighibe et al. (2022).



METHODOLOGY

This study is survey-based research because it uses a questionnaire to obtain data from a representative sample of a large population to make inferences about the population in terms of their patronage behaviour towards smartphones. Hence, the specific survey research design adopted is a cross-sectional survey research design, which studies a representative sample of smartphone users at a single point in time to provide a snapshot of the current state of association between word-of-mouth communication and customer patronage behaviour. The target population comprised 2000 smartphone users in Calabar, Cross River State, which resulted in a sample size of 333 users through the Taro Yamane sample size estimation procedure (Chaokromthong & Sintao, 2021). To select the respondents for the survey exercise, we adopted the convenience sampling technique. With the aid of a 5-member team of enumerators, the study administered a structured questionnaire to respondents to obtain the data required. The research questionnaire had a 5-point Likert scale design with statements adapted from Emily and Saunders (2020); Adjertey and Annang (2017); Abraham et al. (2018); and Anyadighibe et al. (2022). Statements 1-4 were designed to measure customer referral; statements 5-8 were designed to measure celebrity endorsement; statements 9-12 were designed to measure social media; and statements 13-16 were designed to measure customer patronage behaviour. Face and content validity methods were adopted to validate the questionnaire, while Cronbach's alpha coefficients confirmed the instrument's reliability before field administration. The instrument was considered reliable because all its measurement scales generated Cronbach's alpha coefficients ranging from 0.7 and above: Customer referral [$\alpha = 0.852$]; celebrity endorsement [$\alpha = 0.792$]; social media [$\alpha = 0.749$]; and customer patronage behaviour [$\alpha = 0.805$]. Subsequently, the hypotheses developed for this study were statistically tested and validated using multiple linear regression with the following regression model:

$$CPB = a + \beta_1 CREF + \beta_2 CENDORS + \beta_3 SOC MED + e$$

Where:

- a = The intercept (or constant)
- $\beta_1 CREF$ = Coefficient of customer referral
- $\beta_2 CENDORS$ = Coefficient of celebrity endorsement
- $\beta_3 SOC MED$ = Coefficient of social media
- e = Error margin (5 per cent)



ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

To obtain data for the study, a total of 333 questionnaire copies were administered to smartphone users. However, 276 copies (representing 82.9 per cent) were retrieved and considered usable for analysis, while the remaining 57 copies (representing 17.1 per cent) were technically unusable for the study. Following a multivariate analytical procedure, the null hypotheses developed for the study were tested as follows:

(i) **H₀:** Customer referral has no significant effect on customer patronage behaviour towards smartphones.

(ii) **H₀:** Celebrity endorsement has no significant effect on customer patronage behaviour towards smartphones.

(iii) **H₀:** Social media has no significant effect on customer patronage behaviour towards smartphones in Calabar.

Predictors: Customer referral, celebrity endorsement and social media

Outcome: Customer patronage behaviour

Decision rule: The null hypothesis (H₀) is rejected when the P-value is below 0.05 ($p < .05$). Conversely, if the P-value is above 0.05 ($p > .05$), the null hypothesis is accepted

Table 1: Model summary of the effect of word-of-mouth communication on customer patronage behaviour towards smartphones

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.614 ^a	.426	.416	2.31909

a. Predictors: (Constant), Customer referral, celebrity endorsement and social media

Source: *Authors' calculations via SPSS (2023)*

Table 2: ANOVA^a of the effect of word-of-mouth communication on customer patronage behaviour towards smartphones

Model		Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	998.147	4	998.147	201.320	.000 ^b
	Residual	1343.491	271	4.958		
	Total	2341.638	275			

a. Dependent Variable: Customer patronage behaviour

b. Predictors: (Constant), Customer referral, celebrity endorsement and social media

Source: *Authors' calculations via SPSS (2023)*



Table 3: Coefficients of the effect of word-of-mouth communication on customer patronage behaviour towards smartphones

Model	Unstandardised Coefficients		Standardised Coefficients		
	B	Std. Error	Beta	T	Sig.
1 (Constant)	16.042	.827		19.403	.000
Customer referral	.344	.073	.332	4.720	.000
Celebrity endorsement	.345	.087	.309	3.980	.000
Social media	.538	.086	.360	6.262	.000

a. Dependent Variable: Customer patronage behaviour

Source: *Authors' calculations via SPSS (2023)*

Interpretation

The results displayed in Tables 1-3 depict the multiple regression analysis of the effect of word-of-mouth communication on customer patronage behaviour towards smartphones. Table 1, which is the model summary, reveals that the relationship between the independent variable (word-of-mouth communication) and the dependent variable (customer patronage behaviour) is 61.4 per cent (as seen in the R column), which indicates a very strong degree of correlation. The coefficient of determination ($R^2(e)^2$) of 0.426 indicates that up to 42.6 per cent of the variants in the dependent variable (customer patronage behaviour) are explained or predicted by the independent variable (word-of-mouth communication). This implies that a unit change in word-of-mouth communication will affect customer patronage behaviour towards smartphones by up to 42.6 per cent when other factors are held constant. The F-test (201.320, $P < 0.05$) statistic in Table 2 indicates that the overall prediction of the dependent variable by the independent variable is statistically significant; therefore, the regression model provides substantive evidence to conclude that word-of-mouth communication has a significant effect on customer patronage behaviour towards smartphones. Table 3 is the coefficients table, which provides necessary information on the capability of each word-of-mouth communication dimension to predict the dependent variable (customer patronage behaviour).

From the table, it can be seen that all three word-of-mouth communication dimensions tested (customer referral, celebrity endorsement and social media) significantly predicted customer patronage behaviour towards smartphones because their p-values are less than the error margin of 0.05, with positive t-test values. This indicates that the relationship between these variables and customer patronage behaviour is a direct and positive one. Additionally, the standardised beta coefficient column in Table 3 shows the individual contributions of each independent variable to the model. As can be seen in the column, social media had the highest contribution to the model, with a beta coefficient of 0.360 (36.0 per cent). This is followed by customer referral, with a beta coefficient of 0.332 (33.2 per cent). The third highest contributor to the model is celebrity endorsement, with a beta coefficient of 0.309 (30.9 per cent). The results of the multiple regression analysis show that the p-values (customer referral = 0.000, celebrity endorsement = 0.000, and social media = 0.000) of all independent variables were less than the error margin of 0.05. Hence we reject all the null hypotheses, accept all alternative hypotheses and conclude that customer referral, celebrity endorsement and social media significantly positively influenced customer patronage behaviour towards smartphone brands.



DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The first hypothesis test revealed that customer referral has a significant positive effect on customer patronage behaviour towards smartphones. This finding is in line with the study of Emily and Saunders (2020), which revealed that customer referral programmes significantly influenced customer patronage of retail stores in South Carolina. The finding is also reinforced by the study of Adjertey and Annang (2017), which revealed that customer referral programmes significantly improved customer patronage of commercial banks in East Legon, Ghana. The implication of this finding in the context of this study is that manufacturers and companies selling smartphones in Nigeria could substantially improve customers' patronage of their products by actively encouraging existing customers to refer to the brands through positive recommendations.

The test of hypothesis two revealed that celebrity endorsement has a significant positive effect on customer patronage behaviour towards smartphones. This finding is in line with the study of Emily and Saunders (2020), which revealed that celebrity endorsement significantly influenced customer patronage of retail stores in South Carolina. The finding is also supported by the study of Jefferson and Miller (2021), which revealed that celebrity endorsement had a significant positive relationship with customer purchase of automobiles in Colorado. The implication of this finding in the context of this study is that manufacturers and companies selling smartphones in Nigeria could substantially improve customers' patronage of their products by working with famous celebrities to endorse and promote their brands to loyal followers and fans to buy.

Finally, the testing of hypothesis three revealed that social media has a significant positive effect on customer patronage behaviour towards smartphones in Calabar. This finding is backed by the study of Abraham et al. (2018), which revealed that social media significantly positively impacted consumer buying behaviour (customer awareness and patronage) towards energy drinks in Nairobi, Kenya. The finding is also supported by the study of Gretchen (2019), which revealed that social media marketing (Facebook, Twitter and YouTube) significantly positively affected guests' patronage of hotel services in Seychelles. In the context of this study, the finding implies that manufacturers and sellers of smartphones could substantially improve customers' patronage of their products by harnessing the traffic, speed, scope and reach of social media to promote positive-word-of-mouth information about the brands capable of attracting customer patronage.

CONCLUSION AND PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

Mobile phone technologies have proven to be an indispensable tool to facilitate closer and faster communications between and among people despite physical barriers and geographical constraints. Consequently, in developing countries like Nigeria, several brands of smartphones have been produced and are marketed by foreign brands seeking to explore the country's market potential. Even though most patronage of smartphone technologies by Nigerians could be attributed to an active need for such products, other marketing factors like price, packaging and promotion may play a role in influencing consumer patronage behaviour towards smartphones. This study was carried out to explore the influence of word-of-mouth communication on customer patronage behaviour towards smartphones.

It aimed to determine the effects of customer referral, celebrity endorsement and social media on customer patronage behaviour towards smartphone brands. To that end, the study obtained primary data from selected smartphone users via a structured questionnaire. The data obtained were



statistically analysed and tested using descriptive and inferential statistics. The study's findings revealed that customer referral, celebrity endorsement and social media had significant positive effects on customer patronage behaviour towards smartphones. In light of the findings made, the study concludes that there is a significant positive relationship between word-of-mouth communication and customer patronage behaviour, particularly in the context of smartphones in Nigeria. As such, dealers and manufacturers of smartphone brands can utilise the potential of word-of-mouth communication as a marketing strategy to enhance customer patronage of their products in Nigeria.

To do this, we recommend that incentivisation programmes such as free gifts should be organised by manufacturers and dealers of smartphones in order to encourage existing customers to share positive recommendations with others capable of attracting new customer patronage. We also recommend that dealers and manufacturers of smartphones should contract famous celebrities with large active fan bases to endorse and promote their brands to customers to attract customer patronage. Finally, we recommend that dealers and manufacturers of smartphones should harness social media platforms and networks to create awareness for their brands to attract customer patronage.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This study was constrained to just three parameters of word-of-mouth communication (namely celebrity endorsement, customer referral and social media). It is critical for future studies to incorporate more variables, particularly e-word of mouth, to explore the role of word-of-mouth communications in impacting consumer behaviour in the digital age. This study was overwhelmingly constrained to the smartphone industry in Nigeria; hence its generalisations are limited to this market. For the sake of extended generalizability, future research should be replicated across other industries, such as fast-moving consumer goods, banking, telecommunications, hospitality and transportation, to generate new insights for practical utilisation.

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