

BRAND NAME AND PAST EXPERIENCE: KEY DRIVERS OF PASSENGER PATRONAGE IN TRANSIT COMPANIES IN SOUTH-SOUTH NIGERIA

¹Nwankwo C. O, ²Fawohunre F. A and ³Obasanjo O. T

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Abstract

This study explores the relationship between service experience and passenger patronage of transit companies in the South-South region of Nigeria. The research focuses on commuters' experiences in transit companies, like commuter and charter services, to understand customers' perceptions and their impact on customer value and loyalty. Utilizing the Theory of Reasoned Action, the study examines factors such as brand name, pricing, service quality, and past experience as cues for predicting customer experience and how they influence passengers' patronage decision. The study notes that transportation services are evaluated differently, as they require simultaneous production and consumption, and are intangible and heterogeneous. The study further emphasizes that customer satisfaction is critical to retain and win new customers, and it highlights the importance of valuable research in the service industry in Nigeria.

Through a survey research design approach, the study arrived at a sample size of 310 respondents from 47 different public transportation companies operating in the South-South region. The study employed the proportional sampling method to ensure an equal chance of capturing passengers' experiences across all transporters in the area. The data collected from primary sources through structured questionnaires was analysed using simple regression analysis to test hypotheses at a 0.05 level of significance.

The study revealed that the brand name of transporters and past experience are relational dimensions that can predict passenger patronage of transit companies. The empirical results of the study show that the brand name of the transporter and past experiences are significant positive drivers of passenger's choice of patronising transit

¹Department of Marketing, Faculty of Business Administration, University of Uyo, Nigeria.

² Department of Marketing, Faculty of Business Administration, University of Uyo, Nigeria.

³ Department of Marketing, Faculty of Business Administration, University of Uyo, Nigeria.

companies. The study recommends that transporters should recognise the affiliation between the brand name of their services and passengers' perceptions of service quality and value. Creating a positive impression during service encounters should be the goal of transporters to maintain a good brand image.

INTRODUCTION

Passengers have high regard for transport companies that offer them cost effective, convenient and quality services. Several indicators have been drawn up to explain passenger patronage decisions. Gabbott and Hogg (1998) assert that consumers are more likely to purchase wellknown brand products with positive brand image as a way to lower purchase risks. It is important to note that transport services like other service products are intangible and heterogeneous, and are judged by the performance and the experience of those who use them. This creates the possibility of being interpreted and judged differently, by both the provider and the user in question (Pena, Da-silva, Tronchin & Melieiro, 2013). The declaration that services are immaterial and accordingly intangible has a very long tradition (Moeller, 2010). Evaluation of a service is more complex than evaluating that of a good, because goods are tangible and their defects can be detected, their functioning assessed and their durability compared. Conversely, service is first purchased and then it is produced and consumed simultaneously. Thus, the possible nonconformities are produced and experienced, characterising their inseparability (Cruz & Melleiro, 2010).

Often, a passenger's choice of a particular transport company as a preferred means of travelling is influenced by experiences encountered in their services. Experience can be seen as a continuous process of doing and undergoing impressions that provide meaning to the individual. It is an important tool for customer patronage, retention and loyalty and influences the company's business performance (Magatef & Tomalieh, 2015). Thus, a common reason for public transport users to stop using or express distaste for the services of a particular operator could be dissatisfaction with services experienced (Lierap, et al., 2016). Experience marketing is an evolving area of study within the marketing discipline with limited research evidence in the service industry in Nigeria. Despite the apparent growth and contributions of the transportation sector to the tourism and hospitality industry, there is little empirical research on service experience dimensions as they relate to the patronage of transit companies. Past studies indicate that customers use some factors, such as brand name and vehicle accessories, fares charged, service quality and past experience, as cues to predict their experiences, and these factors are likely to have strong influences on customer experience.

The present study will adopt these variables in its focus on examining service experience and a passenger's choice of patronising transit companies. The main objective of this study is to examine the relationship between service experience and passenger patronage of transit companies in the South-South region of Nigeria. Specifically, this study seeks to:

- i. assess the relationship between brand name of transporters and passenger patronage of the transit companies operating in the South-South region of Nigeria; and to
- ii. Establish the relationship between past experience by the passenger and patronage of transit companies operating in the South-South region of Nigeria.

The following hypotheses are formulated to guide the conduct of the study:

H₁: There is no significant relationship between brand name of transporters and passengers' patronage of transit companies operating in the South-south Region of Nigeria.

H2: Passengers' past experience does not have significant influence on their patronage of transit companies operating in the South-South region of Nigeria.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Service Experience in Transit Companies

In marketing literature, experiences are often used to refer to a certain group of services that include travel, music, theatre, restaurants, hotels, and the arts (Sandstrom, et al., 2008). Mashingaidze (2014) defines customer experience as the internal and subjective responses customers have to any direct or indirect contact with a business. Service experience is defined as the subjective personal reactions and feelings by consumers when consuming or using a service (Manhas & Tukamushaba, 2015). Service experience can also be seen as the end-to-end set of customer experiences that add value to a service. This is typically viewed from the customer's perspective as a journey whereby a consumer discovers, purchases, and experiences and participates in a service (Spacey, 2018). Thus, customer experiences originate from a set of interactions between a customer and a product, a company, or part of its organisation, which provoke a reaction (Mashingaidze, 2014). According to Schmitt (2011), one of the most fundamental concepts of experience marketing is that value does not only reside in the object of consumption (whether goods or services) and in seeking out and processing information about such objects, but value also lies in the experience of consumption. Helkkula (2011) asserts that experience can be "real" and physical, or "virtual" and observed, or perhaps a holistic phenomenon that combines both "real" and "virtual" elements. It can also be a single event or a process of events.

Transportation is the situation whereby passengers and goods could be moved or transported from one place to another so as to achieve some element of social, economic, political and psychological aspirations unhindered (Aluko, 2000). This means that transport consists of routes, media and traffic of persons and goods (Nwankwo, et al., 2016). A very popular means of road transportation that ease the movement of persons, goods and services from one location to another are transit companies which commuter services, charter services and so on, fall into. According to Ojo et al. (2014), public transportation includes all transport facilities in which passengers do not use their personal means of transportation to travel. Public transport refers to the means by which larger proportions of urban and rural dwellers gain physical access to the goods, services, and activities they need for their livelihoods and wellbeing (Fitzgerald, 2012). Singh (2016) carried out a study on an assessment of passenger satisfaction with public bus transport services. The researcher found that five underlying factors influenced passengers' satisfaction with public bus transport services in the city. Out of these five factors, comfort and safety had the greatest impact on overall satisfaction, followed by the adequacy of capacity of public bus transport services, orderliness and neatness of buses' interiors, elegant design of buses and bus stops, and accessibility to public bus transport services in the city.

Present-day transit users demand fast, comfortable, cheap, reliable, safe and secure services. They also consider factors like the brand name and vehicle accessories, prices charged by commuters, advertising incentives offered to potential customers/passengers, word of mouth information about the transporters, as well as past experiences in choosing transporters to patronise. An encounter with all or some of these factors tend to form passengers' travel experience proxies over time.

Brand Name of Transporter

A brand name creates an identity that people can associate with; they may also be an avenue where customers create perceptions and give customers an insight to know what to expect. The American Marketing Association (AMA, 2017) defines a brand as a name, term, design, symbol or any other feature that identifies one seller's goods or services as distinct from those of other sellers. Mishra and Dutt (2014) add that brand names are a means

of identifying the goods and services of one business or group of businesses and to differentiate them from those of competitors. Brand names play a very important role in the consumer's decision making process and it is a valuable asset that assumes a vital role in the development of marketing strategies (Assali, 2016).

In transportation, brand names seem to be targeted primarily towards influencing the service desirability and people's behaviour (Assali, 2016). It is aimed at creating an image of the transport company in the minds of actual and potential customers as well as customers who patronise impulsively. Customers choose their favourable and familiar brands due to the rise in their consciousness. Thus, the image a brand name creates in the passenger(s) mind is that of reflection which is held in the mind of the customers over time, and it is basically what comes to the mind when a brand is placed before the customers (Saleem & Raja, 2014).

Najafi and Rahmani (2013) carried out a study to examine the effects of service brands on customer's loyalty. The author considered four dimensions of brand, namely: the brand image; company image; company trust; and employee trust. Their impact on customer loyalty was examined among customers of Tehran real estate services in Tehran city. The basis of the research was to understand the theoretical and operational services of a brand and how consumer perceptions of a brand could influence customer value and loyalty. Findings of the study indicate the existence of a positive impact of customer's perceptions of brand image on customer's perceptions of service value. The researchers recommended that companies should focus on factors that make the customer's perceptions of brand name better. It was also found that evidence of the brand name in the services area has a positive effect on customer loyalty, based on what customers have heard about the brand.

Brand names of transporters play an important role in helping customers perceive the value associated with the service offered (Forozia et al., 2013). This in turn builds a part of the definition that tends to describe the service experienced by passengers. In spite of the importance that passengers/customers place on the brand names of the transporters they patronise, other factors like the passenger's past experience may also collectively influence their patronage decisions.

Past Experience

A major reason for creating a pleasant customer experience is to create a buzz and positive conversations among customers about a service product, since live experiences are considered to be one of the main triggers of word-of-mouth (Masterman & Wood, 2008). Customer experience is the key driver of their satisfaction which in turn inculcates commitment (Sharma & Raouf, 2015). An experience means the service encounter and/or service process that creates the customer's cognitive, emotional and behavioural responses in customer's memories and stays for a relatively long time (Edvardsson, 2005; Urban, 2010).

The customer experience originates from a set of interactions between a customer and a service product, a company, or part of its organisation, which provokes an action. Customer experience is the internal and subjective response customers have to any direct or indirect contact with a company's services (Verhoef et al., 2009). Direct contact generally occurs in the course of purchase and during the usage of the service which is usually initiated by the customer. Indirect contact often involves unplanned encounters with representatives of a company or brands and takes the form of word-of-mouth recommendations or criticisms, advertising, news reports, reviews and so forth (Meyer & Schwager, 2007).

According to Carú and Cova (2008), the consumption experiences are spread over a period of time and has four major stages that influence consumer's decisions and future actions:

- i. Pre-consumption experience which is related to the expectation, the search, planning and foreseeing of the experience;

- ii. Purchasing experience which involves the selection, payment and packaging of a product as well as the interaction with service and environment;
- iii. Core consumption experience that involves sensations, satisfaction levels and transformation; and
- iv. The remembered consumption experience and the nostalgia experience where classification of memories used to re-live and remember past experiences happens.

These experiences are created not only by those elements which the service provider can control (like service interface, atmosphere, price), but also by elements that are outside of the service provider's control (like the influence of others, purpose or choice of patronage). Additionally, customer experience encompasses the total experience, including the search, purchase, consumption, and after-sale phases of the experience, and may involve multiple service provider channels (Verhoef et al., 2009). Adbalslam et al. (2013) carried out a study to examine how impact factors like trust, social presence and past experience could influence customer purchase intention of e-commerce. Findings from the study showed that all these factors have positive correlation with buyers' intentions and purchasing behaviours, but trust was the strongest factor that affects the intention to purchase online, judging from past experience. Therefore, the study concluded that three factors; trust, past experience, and social presence had a strong relationship with customers' intention to purchase and were the main drivers that improve online business.

Usually, customers use their past experience when they want to purchase a brand regardless of its performance, quality and aesthetic appeal (Alamgir et al., 2010). Past experiences gathered from the consumption of transport services might essentially affect what customers expect next time and from other service providers (Urban, 2010). According to Velázquez et al. (2010), customers with a positive experience of the product or service at a previous instant, tend to be more committed to the service provider. This study is carried out with the premise that positive or negative past experience influences customer choice of patronising transport companies.

Theoretical Underpinning

This study is based on the Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA) which evolved from the field of social psychology and was developed by Martin Fishbein and Icek Ajzen in 1975, as an improvement on the information integration theory by Martin Fishbein. The Theory of Reasoned Action aims at explaining behavioural intentions, that is, how individuals will behave based on their pre-existing attitude and behavioural intentions. The theory explains that an individual's decision to engage in a particular behaviour is based on the outcomes the individual expects as a result of performing the behaviour. The Theory of Reasoned Action is explicitly concerned with behaviours; it uses two elements, attitudes and norms (or the expectation of other people) to predict behavioural intent. This is shown in Figure 1 below.

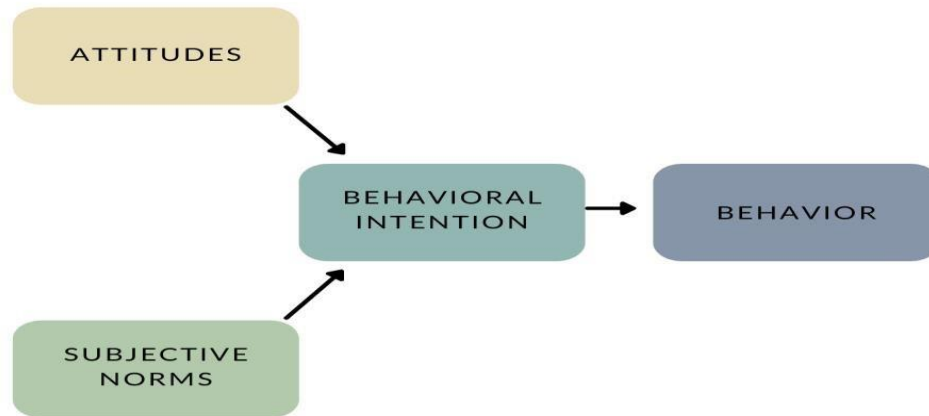


Figure 1: Elements of Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA).

Source: Fishbein & Ajzen (1975).

According to Fishbein and Ajzen (1975), the Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA) emphasises that behavioural intentions are created by two factors and an additional influence from perceived behavioural control.

- i. Our attitudes; attitudes have two components, which Fishbein calls the evaluation and strength of a belief.
- ii. Subjective norms: also have two components which are normative beliefs and motivation to comply. It is the beliefs about what others will think about the behaviour.
- iii. Behavioural control: This defines that people tend to associate the performance of a certain behaviour with a set of expected outcomes.

Several studies on consumer behaviour have adopted this theory to explain the rationale why consumers act the way they do (Kim et al., 2010; Kumar & Sudhir, 2015; Sulehri & Ahmed, 2017; Shin & Parker, 2017). Our study finds its support on the Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA) on the basis that passengers in their choice and decision of patronising transit companies have different characteristics which are mediated by their past experience or the quest for a new experience and this affects their attitudes, which in turn affects their intentions and behaviours.

RESEARCH METHODS

The study utilised the survey research design approach. This design was chosen to aid the researcher get information directly from the respondents. The population for this study consists of all long and short distance travellers who are 18 years and above, patronising the different public transportation companies in the South-South region of Nigeria at the time of this field study, constituting an infinite population. The number of registered transport companies operating in the region is estimated to be 47.

The sample size of this research was determined using the Top-man Formula for unknown population. The adoption of this formula was to enable the researcher to get an appropriate sample size for the study. A pilot study was thus carried out, using the research questionnaire on 40 selected on-site passengers that were encountered by the researcher patronising these transport companies in Uyo. The pilot study revealed that over seventy percent of the population would always expect a positive rating of all the variables under study. Thus, the sample size arrived at was 310.

The sample size was divided into sub-groups using the proportional sampling method, to ascertain the number of respondents to be assessed from each registered transport company. To apply this method, the number of passengers for each company was arrived at by dividing the total number of sample sizes for the study by the 47 estimated public transport companies operating in the South-South region. Thus, seven passengers per transport

company were randomly sampled, to give passengers of all the transporters in the study area an equal chance of being captured in the survey. Out of the 310 copies of questionnaire administered to passengers of the 47 transporters, 289 copies were retrieved in usable form, giving a response rate of 93 percent.

The main source of data that utilised in this study is primary data, which were collected through the use of structured questionnaires. The predictor (transporters' brand name and past experience) and the criterion (customer's patronage) variables were measured on a multiple choice questionnaire, on a '5' point Likert scale, where '5' was the highest positive attitude response to the question to '1', being the lowest attitude response to the questions. Data collected were analysed using the simple regression analysis and all hypotheses were tested at 0.05 level of significance.

Data Analysis and Presentation

To test for reliability of the research instrument the Cronbach alpha was used as a reliability parameter to determine the internal consistency of the items. The result coefficient for the items were:

Table 1: Cronbach's Alpha Pre-test Result S/No. Variables No. of Items Cronbach's

Alpha Coefficient			
1	Brand Name	4	0.695
2	Past Experience	4	0.711
3	Choice of Patronage	4	0.702
Total		12	0.703

Source: Field survey, (2022).

The resulting Cronbach coefficients for each item were 0.6 above, indicating the reliability, or internal consistency, of the tested items. The analysis of demographic variables are shown on Table 1.

Table 2: Demographic Data of the Respondents

Variables	Frequency of Respondents	Percentage (%)
<u>Age</u>		
20-24 years	11	3.8
25-34years	196	67.8
35-44years	82	28.4
45 years and above	0	0
Total	289	100.0
<u>Gender of the Respondents</u>		
Male	192	66.4
Female	97	33.6
Total	289	100.0
<u>Travel Distance</u>		
Long distance	91	31.5
Short distance	198	68.5
Total	289	100.0

Frequency of Patronage

Regular Patronage	107	51.6
First time Patronage	33	11.4
Occasional	149	37.0
Total	289	100.0

Source: Field Survey, (2022).

Table 2 indicates that 3.8 percent of the respondents were between the age of 20-24 years, while most respondents were between the age of 25-34 years (67.8 percent) and 35-44 years made up 28.4 percent of the total sample population. The table indicates that 66.4 percent of the respondents were males while 33.6 percent were females. This implies that the regions' transport system was accommodating to both male and female commuters, who were transiting to places within the region or other parts of the country.

The table also indicates that 91 (31.5 percent) respondents were on a long-distance trip as at the time of data collection and 198 (68.5 percent) respondents were on a short distance one. One hundred and seven respondents (37 percent) regularly patronised the transport companies, 33 respondents (11.4 percent) were first time passengers at the transport companies and 149 respondents (51.6 percent) occasionally patronised the transport companies.

Test of Hypotheses

H₁: There is no significant positive relationship between brand name of transporters and passengers' patronage of transit companies.

Table 3: Summary of Simple Regression Showing Relationship between Brand Name of Transporters and Passengers' Patronage of Transit Companies (Appendix 1)

	B₁	SE	B₂	t-value	Significant (2 tailed)
Constant	4.597	0.844	-	5.448	0.000
Brand Name of Transporter	0.768	0.043	0.729	18.030	0.000
Dependent variable: Passenger Patronage					
R =	0.729 ^a				
R ² =	0.531				
Adjusted R-square =	0.529				
Std. Error of estimate =	2.54128				
F =	325.067				

Significance = 0.000

*significantly related at 5% ($p < 0.05$). B_1 = unstandardised beta, B_2 = standardised beta, SE = standard error.

Source: The Researcher's Computation, (2022).

Table 3 shows R² of 0.531 which means that the independent variable (brand name of transporter) accounted for 53.1% of the variation in passenger patronage. An indication that the regression model of this study has a good explanatory power of the dependent variable. In addition, the p-value < 0.000 suggests that the results of the regression model could not have occurred by chance and that the independent variables significantly predicted the dependent variable.

To assess the importance of the independent variable in determining the degree of change in the dependent variable, the beta coefficients for the variable, brand name of transporter X₁ (BN), had statistically significant standardised coefficient of $\beta = 0.768$, $p < 0.000$, showing a positive significant influence on passenger patronage.

This finding can be interpreted that every unit change in brand name will lead to a 0.768 change in passenger patronage. Since the pvalue is less than 0.05($p=0.000<0.05$), the null hypothesis is rejected. Therefore, there is a significant positive relationship between the brand name of the transporter and passenger patronage. To justify the simple linear regression equation:

$$Y = a_0 + \beta_1 X_1 + \dots e$$

$$P_p = a_0 + \beta_1 B_n + \dots e$$

Where: B_n = Brand Name

P_p = Passenger Patronage

The resulting equation is thus:

$$P_p = 4.597 + 0.768 B_n$$

Hypothesis Two

H_2 : Passengers' past experience does not have significant influence on their patronage of transit companies.

Table 3: Summary of Simple Regression Showing Relationship between Passengers' Past Experience with the Transporter and Passenger Patronage of Transit Companies (Appendix 1)

	B_1	SE	B_2	t-value	Significant (2 tailed)
Constant	7.269	1.381	-	5.264	0.000
Passengers' Past Experience	0.596	0.066	0.469	8.997*	0.000
Dependent variable: Passenger Patronage					
R =	0.469 ^a				
R^2 =	0.220				
Adjusted R-square =	0.217				
Std. Error of Estimate =	3.27760				
F =	80.954				
Significance =	0.000				

*significantly related at 5% ($p<0.05$). B_1 = unstandardised beta, B_2 = standardised beta, SE = standard error.

Source: The Researcher's Computation, (2022).

Table 3 shows R^2 of 0.220 which means that the independent variable (passengers' past experience) accounted for 22% of the variation in passenger patronage. An indication that the regression model of this study has a good explanatory power of the dependent variable. Also, the p-value < 0.000 suggests that the results of the regression model could not have occurred by chance and that the independent variable significantly predicted the dependent variable.

To assess the importance of the independent variable in determining the degree of change in the dependent variable, the beta coefficients for the variable, passengers' past experience X_2 (P_e), had statistically significant standardised coefficient of $\beta = 0.596$, $p < 0.000$, showing a positive significant influence on passenger's patronage. This finding can be interpreted that every unit change in passengers' past experience will lead to a 0.596 change in passenger patronage. Since the p-value is less than 0.05($p=0.000<0.05$), the null hypothesis is rejected. Therefore, there is a significant positive relationship between passengers' past experience and passenger patronage.

To justify the simple linear regression equation:

$$Y = a_0 + \beta_2 X_2 + \dots e$$

$$P_p = a_0 + \beta_2 P_e + \dots e$$

Where: P_e = Past Experience

P_p = Passenger Patronage

The resulting equation is thus:

$$P_p = 7.269 + 0.596P_e$$

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The study showed a significant positive relationship between the two dimensions of service experience (brand name of transporters and past experience) and passenger patronage of transit companies operating in the South-South region of Nigeria. The result of the first hypothesis tested shows that there is a significant positive relationship between brand name of transporters and passengers patronage of transit companies in the South-south region., $\beta_1 = 0.768$. This finding is in agreement with the work of Najafi and Rahmani (2013) that brand image had a positive impact on customer's perception of a service offer based on customer's perceptions of service value. Their study also indicates that evidence of the brand name in the services area had a positive effect on customer's loyalty based on what they have heard about the brand. The result of the second hypothesis also showed that passengers' past experience has a significant positive relationship with passengers patronage of transit companies operating in the South-South region. It showed a regression coefficient of $\beta = 0.596$. This finding agrees with the work of Abdalslam, Nurdiana and Jali (2013) that buyers' intentions and purchasing behaviours, as well as trust were strong factors that affect the intention to purchase or patronise a service, judging from their past experience.

CONCLUSION

From the study conducted, it is concluded that brand name of transporters and past experience are relational dimensions that can predict passenger patronage of transit companies because the empirical results of the study clearly underscore that the brand name of the transporter and past experiences are significant positive drivers of passenger's choice of patronising transit companies. Although the two service experience dimensions are important, the brand name of the transporter was seen as the dimension with the highest significant influence ($R^2 = 0.531$) on passenger patronage at 53.1 percent. Based on the underscored, it is further concluded that the greater the extent of the predictor variables, the higher the choice of passenger patronage.

RECOMMENDATIONS

On the basis of the findings, it is recommended that transporters should note that brand name has an affiliation with passenger's perceptions of the value and quality of services they deliver. Passengers are likely to use unconventional means to share their experiences with others (whether positive or negative experiences), which could come in the forms of negative or positive word-of-mouth about the brand. This is capable of affecting passenger's decision to keep using a transit service or switch to another transport brand. Hence, creating a good impression during service encounters should be the goal of transporters for the sake of their brand's image.

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