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CUSTOMER CENTRICITY AND FIRM OPERATIONAL PERFORMANCE: A STUDY OF FAST MOVING CONSUMER GOODS' FIRMS IN OGUN STATE, NIGERIA.

Michael Segun Ogunmuyiwa, Ph.D

Department of Business Administration,
Olabisi Onabanjo University
Nigeria
msogunmuyiwa@oouagoiwoye.edu.ng

Ifedayo Oladele Agbaje
Ph.D student
Department of Business Administration,
Olabisi Onabanjo University
Nigeria

ABSTRACT

This study examines customers centricity and firm operational performance in Fast Moving Consumer Goods (FMCGs) in Ogun State, Nigeria. The study is premised on three customer-centric elements or dimensions: customer integration, internal integration, and external integration. A descriptive survey research design was employed in the study, using the maximum variance sampling technique. A structured questionnaire was administered on customers of selected FMCGs in Ogun State, Nigeria. Employing the Ordinary Least Squares (O.L.S) technique, the results revealed that customers' centricity significantly affects the operational performance of FMCGs in Nigeria. The findings also reveal that external integration and customers' integration are the most significant dimensions of customers' centricity. It is recommended that organisations should pay more attention to their customers' integration and external integration since these two dimensions are the most significant customers' centricity dimensions explaining FMCGs operational performance in Nigeria

Keywords: Customer Centricity, Customers' Integration, External Integration, FMCGs, Internal Integration, Operational Performance.

Jel Classification: L25, L67, M31.

Introduction

Customers have always been an important determinant in organisational success, as they play a significant role in achieving market share targets. This is particularly true for the highly competitive business environment of the 21st century, where consumers are becoming more informed about the availability of numerous competing products in the market. Intense competition, outstanding customer preference and the lack of customer loyalty have led to a steady rise in customer demand, scarce resources and advancements in information and communication technology. To excel in today's highly competitive industry, concentrating solely on the consumer is rapidly becoming an effective strategy for most businesses.

Several scholars (Inversini *et al.* 2020; Martinelli, 2019; Habel *et al.* 2019; Crecelius *et al*. 2018; Lamberti, 2013) have promoted the acceptance of customer-centricity (concentrating on the customers) rather than commodity centeredness (focusing on the product). Consumer centricity can be seen as the degree to which a company relies on consumers' knowledge and offers a focused customer solution. It focuses on customer needs, how customers desire them, and how the enterprise can put the best together to meet consumer needs and reward achievement and revenue generation (Vlašić and Tutek, 2017). It creates meaningful customer interactions during the pre and post-sale era to increase customer satisfaction and business profitability. From the knowledge point, customer-centricity involves delivering good customer service through the buying process and finally through the post-purchase process.

Scholars (Inversini *et al.* 2020; Martinelli, 2019; Habel *et al.* 2019; Al-Zyadat and Al-Zyadat, 2018; Voropai, 2018; Stoppel and Roth, 2017; Vlašić and Tutek, 2017; Bii and Wanyoike, 2014) have carried out researches on multi-dimensional customer centricity, with most results showing that customer concentration has a positive effect on the values, competitiveness and ovation of companies. Albeit, previous studies have explored the impact of customer centricity on firm’s operational performance in both developed and developing counties with mixed results. This however need be looked at from the standpoint of Nigerian FMCGs. Lamberti (2013) classifies customer-centricity elements into four, namely: Customer integration, interactive CRM, internal integration, and external integration. However, this study only employs three elements of customer-centricity (customer integration, internal integration and external integration) because customers relationship management has been extensively studied.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the impact of the three (3) customer-centricity elements on the operational performance of some selected Nigerian FMCGs in Ogun State, Nigeria. The rest of the paper is organised as follows: Section II is on the review of literature and section III is on the methodology and empirical results. Section IV houses the conclusion and recommendations.

Review of Relevant Literature

Consumer-centricity in marketing deals with redefining the customer relationship management approaches. Consumer-centric marketing truthfully places customers in the middle. Customer-centric management is a sophisticated marketing philosophy rather than customer relationship management. It helps an organisation to gather very detailed information about its clients, thereby producing profound user data with which it operates. Data connections, and databases greatly enhance this. It is the means towards facilitating customer interactions, information collection as well as assessment of information. In addition to increasingly shifting to a combined portion of the corporate business strategy, customer-centricity is the degree to which an organisation focuses on customer awareness and provides the customer with a centred solution.

It represents the organisation's philosophy on which customers' wants, how they need it, and how the organisation can pull together the best to accomplish the individual's wishes, incentives for accomplishment, and then generate revenue (Vlašić and Tutek, 2017). In other words, customer-centricity is a way to run a business with your customer in mind in order to generate a meaningful pre- and post-sale customer experience to drive repeat sales, consumers loyalty and income. Customer centricity is not only about delivering outstanding customer service. It means providing a fantastic experience through the buying process and finally through the post-purchase process from the knowledge level. This means putting the client first and at the centre of the market.

In contrast, product-centred organisations concentrate on the organisation's arrangements and high-quality products' and sales. Customer-centred organisations concentrate on creating a value proposition, which is seen as the central tenet of most organisations (Hemel and Rademakers, 2016). In a customer-centred organisation, their business activities are focused on customers rather than products. In a customer-centred organization, organisa-tional goals and policy, organisational procedures, organisational arrangement and methods are aimed at improving and delivering increased customer value (Lamberti, 2013).

Operational performance measures relate to how an organisation performs in terms of non-financial issues. The non-financial issues include the change in intangible assets such as human skills and abilities, patent, product innovation, stakeholder performance and productivity. Robert (2018) argued that operational measures, when used with financial measures, indicate opportunities that have been created but have not yet been financially realised. Studies differ on which operational measures to use, and it may well be the case that appropriate operational measures are unique to each industry, making generalisation across industries impractical. However, Abdullatif *et al.* (2008); Abdel-Maksoud (2004); Otley (1999) and Bhimani (1993) opined that due to the ever-changing business environment, operational measures of performance to be utilised should be competitive while Ahmed and Azim (2015) asserted that poorly selected performance measures would send the wrong signal to the stakeholder.

The adopted measures of operational performance in this study is innovation. According to Abdullatif *et al*. (2008), this measure is unique to the service and manufacturing industries and enhances the firm to live above the challenges of uncertainty in a dynamic business environment.

Albeit, literature is replete on the relationship between customer centricity and firm performance across countries- either in developed or developing countries. However, the link between customer centricity and organizational outcomes such as financial performance or overall firm performance has been rarely tested. Indeed, previous research has suggested that customer centricity is a vital ingredient of organizational financial performance (Frankenberger *et al.* 2013; Lamberti, 2013; Smirnova *et al.* 2018).

Also, it has been affirmed that marketing innovativeness could assist in explaining the link between customer centricity and financial performance beyond the often-simplified approach that customer centricity and financial performance are highly correlated (Nieves and Diaz-Meneses, 2016). The study of Hemel and Rademakers (2016) has also shown that ‘the process of implementing customer centricity throughout the entire organization tends to be poorly understood in practice.

However, a study conducted by Smirnova *et al*. (2018) affirmed that customer centricity directly and significantly predicts financial success of the firm. In contrast, the paper goes further that customer centricity alone is inadequate to determine superior financial performance of the firm. It opined that marketing innovativeness is a salient construct for understanding the impact of customer centricity on the complex matter of financial performance (Mahmoud *et al*. 2016).

Customer-centricity is related to operational performance when a firm adequately defines a unique customer expectation and optimising customer service to produce profit and preserve customer relationships in order to achieve a competitive advantage (Bii and Wanyoike, 2014; Inversini *et al.* 2020). The fundamental goal of such a customer-centred marketing approach is to produce relevant information to understand consumers' needs and use data or information to communicate with customers to enhance customer management's efficacy, which serves to enhance the profitability of the company (Habel *et al.*, 2019).

Customer-centred organisations are interested in sustaining relationships with their customers irrespective of their status. It simply means that the supply (products) is co-created by the company and the customer by co-opting the customer's expertise (Wind and Rangaswamy, 2001; Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004). The most known characteristic of a customer-centric organisation is customer integration (Lamberti, 2013). Consumer centricity goes beyond customisation: generally customisation is basically product-centred (Lamberti, 2013 and Sheth *et al*., 2000), as it seeks to adjust existing goods to various customer needs rather than to create customer needs-based products. When the product and the entire marketing process are personalised, customer-centricity is at play (Wind and Rangaswamy, 2001). In a company that adopts customer-centricity, customers play an important and active role in the overall marketing process.

Furthermore, Crecelius *et al*. (2019) discovered that suppliers who demonstrate customer centricity by proactively analyzing their customers' structure will increase sales and reduce costs. Despite the fact that customer centricity has been recognised as essential for businesses for decades, empirical research on the effects of customer centricity is scarce (Crecelius *et al.* 2019). The majority of existing marketing literature focuses on how customer-centric characteristics influence firm performance and how customer-centric marketing strategies work (Sheth *et al.* 2000; Crecelius *et al.* 2019).

Alireza *et al.* (2014) conducted a study on the effect of social media marketing on online shopping of customers based on mediating role of value capital, relational capital and brand capital using path analysis. The study made use of 169 students of Tehran University. The results of the path analysis showed that social media marketing had positive and significant impact on value capital, relational capital and brand capital. In addition, the direct effect of relational capital on value capital and brand capital was direct, positive and significant. Three variables of value capital, relational capital and brand capital had a direct, positive and significant effect on e-shopping of customers. Social media marketing had indirectly positive and significant impact on e-shopping of customers via value capital, relational capital and brand capital. Relational capital by value and brand capital had indirect, positive and significant impact on e-shopping of customers.

Crecelius, *et al.* (2018). The authors investigated the upstream impact of a firm's customer-centric organizational structure on its supplier, including both positive effects of greater revenue and negative effects of demanding services that raise the supplier's costs. These countervailing effects on supplier profit are moderated by characteristics of the firm's buying center and the firm–supplier relationship, in accordance with the value capture literature. Findings highlight the need for a supplier to proactively assess the structure of each buyer-firm, as a supplier can take steps to mitigate cost effects and enhance revenue effects.

The study by Johannes *et al.* (2019) affirmed that customer centricity is a frequently debated issue among sales and marketing researchers and practitioners. However, to date no validated scale exists that measures to what extent customers perceive companies as customer centric. Employing qualitative interviews, and a customer survey (N = 246), the authors develop and validate a measurement scale for perceived customer centricity. In addition, using matched survey and financial data from industrial customers (N = 1,089), the authors examine antecedents and consequences of perceived customer centricity. Empirical findings show that customers perceive firms as customer centric if the supplier is customer oriented on both the overall firm level and the salesperson level. Furthermore, perceived customer centricity is strongly linked to customers' loyalty intentions and objective sales revenue, particularly if customers perceive a firm to exhibit high prices. Other relevant studies in relation to customer centricty and firm's performance include Rust *et al.* (2004), Sandra and Don (2012), Paulus *et al*. (2014) and Yongyue (2018).

According to research on the financial implications of customer-centric firm characteristics, structuring divisions across customer groups enhances financial performance by enhancing customer loyalty, but it harms financial performance by increasing coordination costs (Sheth *et al.* 2000). Other related studies on customer centricity and firm performance include Chovancová *et al*. (2015), Abdu and jibriv (2018) and Chen *et al.* (2018). While these studies looked at how customer centricity could influence consumer behaviour and sales, how customer centricity affects performance in developing economies is relatively scarce, hence the reseason for this present study.

The theory behind this research is the theory of customer-centricity, which finds a theoretical precedent in the theory of market orientation (Sheth *et al.*, 2000), but the theory of customer-centricity goes beyond the market orientation theory (Lamberti, 2013). The same fundamental theory derives from both consumer focus and customer-centricity, originating from the marketing principle (Levitt, 1960). Consumer intelligence has a paramount role in the creation of marketing plans in both theories. The philosophy of customer-centricity, however, focuses mainly on human dialogic engagement and customer intelligence ideas (Ramani and Kumar, 2008; Shah *et al.*, 2006). The two theories emphasise the need to share business knowledge within the organisation (customer-centricity theory and market orientation theory), but while market orientation focuses mostly on the sharing of information between functions, customer centricity means organisations where functional boundaries slip into customer-centred processes (Galbraith, 2011; Shah *et al*., 2006).

Methodolgy and Empirical Results

The descriptive survey research design was employed in this study. The data analysed in this study were collected through a survey of employees of P.Z. Cussons Nigeria PLC. The firm is a major fast moving consumer goods manufacturer and of the leaders in the FMCG sub-sector in Nigeria. The study population comprises of the total number of employees of the company in Nigeria which stands at 3500. The company was chosen based on its strategic goal on its website: "To be a leading consumer brand of choice in our operating markets, delivering innovative, sustainable products created by exceptional people".

Using the Slovin sampling calculator, which is based on 5% margin error and 95% confidence level, the total estimated sample size for the study is therefore 347. The data required for this study was gathered through a structured questionnaire. The questionnaire was administered to the selected respondents in the company, out of which 186 (53.6%) copies were retrieved and considered reliable for the analysis. According to Ramshaw

(2020), a response rate of 50% and above is considered statistically significant to draw a valid conclusion.

The questionnaire was subjected to scrutiny by the researchers to ensure face validity. The content validity was achieved by obtaining the views of some scholars on the research instrument. A pilot test was conducted to ascertain the clarity and internal consistency of the research instrument. The test-retest reliability was used in verifying the consistency of the research instrument and a value of 0.766, 0.8821, 0.7022 and 0.816 for customer integration, internal integration, external integration and operational performance were obtained. The research instrument was divided into sections A and B. Section A addresses information on customers' centricity while section B addresses operational performance.

Model Specification

The model for this study is stated in behavioural form as presented below.

$$OPEPER = \beta 0 + \beta 1(CI) + \beta 2(II) + \beta 3(EI) + \mu i \qquad (1)$$

Where;

OPEPER= Operational Performance
CI= Customers Integration

II= Internal Integration

EI= External Integration
μ= Error Term
β0= Intercept of the slope
β1, β2, β3, = Coefficients of Customers Centricity Elements.

In a-priori terms, the constant and the coefficients of customer-centricity elements are expected to be positive i.e > 0. That is, $\beta 0$, $\beta 1,\ \beta 2\ and\ \beta 3\ \ 0$ (2)

Results and Analysis

The following research hypotheses, specified in the null form, were tested in line with the study objectives:

H0₁: Customer integration has no significant effect on FMCGs' operational performance in Nigeria

H0₂: Internal integration has no significant effect on FMCGs' operational performance in Nigeria

H0₃: External integration has no significant effect on FMCGs' operational performance in Nigeria

Table :1 $H0_1$: Customer integration has no significant effect on FMCGs operational performance in Nigeria.

From table 1, the model summary reveals that there is a positive relationship (B = 0.387) between customers integration and operational performance in line with the theoretical and a-priori expectations. The coefficient of determination (R2 = 0.149) reveals that 14.9% variation in operational performance is brought about by customers integration. The Unstandardised beta (B) shows that for every 1 unit change in customers' integration, operational performance increases by 0.366. The t value (tc = 4.107, p = 0.000) shows that customers integration is a significant predictor of operational performance. It is established that customer integration has a significant effect on FMCGs operational performance in Nigeria. The F-statistics also confirms the significance of the overall regression equation and its parameter estimates.

Table 1: Dependent Variable: Operational Performance

Operational Performance

Variable	Unstandardized (B)	SE	B	t-stat	P
Customers Integration	0.366	0.089	0.387	4.107*	0.000
R^2		0.149			
F		491.00* (p=0.000)			

*, ** and *** show significance at 1, 5 and 10 percent respectively

Source: Authors' Field Survey (2021)

Table 2: $H0_2$: Internal integration does not significantly affect FMCGs operational performance in Nigeria.

Table 2: Dependent Variable: Operational Performance

Operational Performance

Variable	Unstandardized (B)	SE	B	t-stat	P
Internal integration	0.048	.144	0.034	.331***	0.742
R^2		0.001			
F		.109*** (p=0.712)			

*, ** and *** show significance at 1, 5 and 10 percent respectively.

Source: Authors' Field Survey (2021)

Table 2 shows that there is no significant relationship (B =.0.034, tc = 0.331 ; p > 0.10) between internal integration and operational performance. The coefficient of determination ($R^2 = 0.001$) reveals that 0.1% variation in operational performance is explained by internal integration. The Unstandardised beta (B) is positive in line with a-priori expectation and shows that for every 1 unit change in internal integration, operational performance increases by 0.048.

The t-value (tc =.331, p = 0.742) shows that internal integration is not significant at the 10 per cent level. The result establishes that internal integration is not a significant predictor of FMCGs operational performance in Nigeria.

Table 3: $H0_3$: External integration has no significant effect on FMCGs operational performance in Nigeria.

Table 3: Dependent Variable: Operational Performance

Operational Performance					
Variable	Unstandardized (B)	SE	B	t-stat	P
External Integration	0.149	.0.070	0.211	2.115**	0..037
R^2		0.045			
F		.4.471** (p=0.033)			

*, ** and *** show significance at 1, 5 and 10 percent respectively.

Source: Authors' Field Survey (2021)

Table 3 shows that there is a positive relationship (R= 0.211) between external integration and operational performance. The coefficient of determination (R^2 = 0.045) reveals that 4.5% variation in operational performance is accounted for by external integration. The Unstandardised beta (B) is positive in line with a-priori expectation and equally shows that for every 1 unit change in external integration, operational performance increases by 0.149. The t value (tc = 0.2115, p = 0.037) shows that external integration is a significant predictor of operational performance. The result establishes that external integration has a significant effect on FMCG operational performance in Nigeria. The F-statistics (Fc= 4.471; $p < 0.05$) confirms the significance of the overall regression equation and its parameter estimates.

Discussion of Findings

From the empirical results of the field survey, it was found that there is a significant impact of customer's centricity on operational performance and this supports the findings of Al-Zyadat and Al-Zyadat (2018) who assert that customer's centricity exert strong influence on operational performance and could drive changes in organisational performance. It can be inferred that customers' centricity is essential to an organisation in building its innovative capacity. That is, the more an organisation focuses on its customers, the better its potentials of creating new products and services tailored towards meeting the specific needs and yearnings of the customers.

In accessing the dimensions of customers' centricity, the result reveals that customers' integration is the most significant driver of operational performance. This implies that FMCGs should tailor their products in such a way that the individual expectations of the customers will be met at a particular point in time. In addition, the significance of external integration is also a pointer that firms should also be cognizant of external integration elements that could propel the operational and financial performance of the firm.

Threoretical Contributions

The theoretical contribution of this paper to the body of knowledge on customer centricity is that it focuses particularly on Three (3) out of the Four (4) elements used to measuring customer centricity as put forward by Lamberti (2013). The Three (3) customer centric elements adopted in this study are on there own part of the general customer relations and customer management concepts and these concepts however need not be overflogged. The significance of the two customer centric elements (customers' integration and external integration.) in this study further proves that, the study's outcome can be applied to other develeoping economies that share peculiar traits with Nigeria.

Implications for Practice

The implications for practice based on the outcome of this study is that firms should embtace the customer centric elements with particular attention paid to customers' integration and external integration. These two elements have not only shown significance in relation to firms's operational performance but its importance among the the customer centric elements for organizational survival cannot be underrated.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The study concludes that customers' centricity is a driver of operational performance of FMCGs. The relationship between customers' centricity (customers integration, external integration) and the operational performance provides an avenue for the organisations to remain relevant in the provisions of value added innovative services. The study also concludes that the more customers centric an organisation becomes, the more innovative it will be.

The study recommends that organisations should pay more attention to its customers' integration and external integration since these two dimensions are the most significant in explaining customer's centricity and movements in firms operational performance. Customers' centricity drives innovation; therefore FMCGs as a matter of policy need to optimise the benefits inherent in customers' centricity.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

The study looked at Three (3) out the Four (4) customer centric elemnets in relation to organizational performance in Nigeria. This however is a limitation as the study did not capture the impact of Customer Relations Management (CRM) on operational performance of firms. Future studies could (i) capture the four elements in Nigeria and in deed in Sub Saharan Africa. (ii) employ the Granger Causality technique to determine the direction of causality between customer centric elements and operational performance since this study assumes that causation is from customer centricity to firm's operational performance.

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Dr. Ogunmuyiwa, Michael Segun is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Business Administration, Faculty of Administration and Management Sciences, Olabissi Onabanjo University, Ago-Iwoye, Nigeria. He has a brief stint in Sona Breweries PLC before joining the academia in 1996. Apart from teaching at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels, he has supervised over 500 undergraduate Projects and not less than 100 M.Sc and M.B.A Dissertations as well as some Ph.D Theses. In addition, he has more than 70 publications in Books, Journals and Learned Conferences both locally and internationally. Dr. M.S Ogunmuyiwa is happily married with Children.

Agbaje, Ifedayo Oladele is a Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D) student in the Department of Business Administration, Faculty of Administration and Management Sciences, Olabissi Onabanjo University, Ago-Iwoye, Nigeria. He is currently undergoing his research work towards the acquisition of his Ph.D

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