



BRAND TRAITS AND BRAND PERFORMANCE OF AUTOMOBILE MARKETING FIRMS IN SOUTH-SOUTH OF NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the influence of brand traits on brand performance of automobile marketing firms in South-South, Nigeria. A conceptual framework was used to illustrate a diagrammatic relationship between dependent and independent variable. The study adopted descriptive research design. The target population was 129 automobile marketing firms in South-South, Nigeria. The study used simple random sampling technique to select 2 respondents each from the 129 automobile marketing firms. The sample size was taken to be 258. A pilot study was carried out to refine the instrument. The quality and consistency of the survey was further assessed using Cronbach's alpha. 258 copies of questionnaire were distributed to respondents, and the number of completed and usable response was 235 out of 258 responses. After data cleaning, 200 (85%) copies of questionnaire were found useful for the analysis. Data analysis was performed on a computer using Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS Version 22) for Windows. Analysis was done using regression analysis. The study revealed that the components of brand traits significantly influence brand price sensitivity and brand alignment. The study therefore concludes that, brand traits significantly influence brand performance of automobile marketing firms in South-South of Nigeria, and recommends amongst others that managers of automobile marketing firms should position strategically, brand sincerity as identified by this study to brand performance, since the study unveiled its statistical significant influence on the metrics of brand performance (brand price sensitivity and brand alignment).

Key Words: Brand alignment, Brand price sensitivity, Brand sincerity, Brand toughness.

INTRODUCTION

Currently Strategic brand traits has become a central theme for brand researchers and a number of these studies on and how branding strategies affect consumers' behaviors have been scrutinized (Esch *et al.*, 2006). It is equally clear in marketing literature that, scholars have been in their expedition for appreciating how consumers appraise brands and act in response to a range of branding agendas (Gurhan-Canli, Sarial-Abi, & Hayran, 2018). In particular, brand trait is critical for developing marketing strategies for ensuring good brand performance. Brand trait is an important determinant for predicting brand performance outcomes such as brand price sensitivity and brand alignment intention, both directly and indirectly. Thus, it is imperative to understand how brand trait affects the process of building brand performance in an organization.

Brand performance has various ways of been measured and this includes brand price sensitivity and brand alignment. Harcourt, Kayii and Ikegwuru (2020) remarked that brand performance is the upshot of constantly affirmative poignant occurrence, substantial attribute-inclined contentment and professed value of an incident, which envelopes brand sincerity and brand toughness. Alhadid (2015) affirms that firms are making serious efforts to maintain their customers' loyalty and stay away from any way of allowing rivals to snatch these customers.

Every business needs loyal customers for success of their brands in the market place. It is well acclaimed that, every contented customer informs nine or ten people regarding their blissful experience and their discontentment to a firm and its product offerings (Hadiza, 2014) So it befalls the companies in recent times to query into the circumstance of apposite affiliation between brand traits and brand performance.

Some empirical studies have investigated brand personality. For example, Roustasekehravani, Abubakar, Azam and Pooladireishahri (2014), Pierre, Haythem and Dwight (2011) and Louis and Lombart (2010). However, the outcome of these studies records discordant views on this subject matter, and calls for more enquiries in this regard. This study therefore, investigates the influence of brand traits on brand performance of automobile marketing firms in South-South of Nigeria.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESES

Theoretical Foundation

The Market-Based View Theory (MBVT)

This theory was propounded by Porter 1996 and later by Peteraf and Bergen (2003). It positions that, industry factors and external market orientation are the most important determinants of firm performance. These external forces are often vibrant and delicate that firms cannot envisage. Competing firms carry out parallel activities in the business but can only attain significant competitive advantage depending on the stage of performance attain in the industry. This means that the strategic position of a firm is delineated by how it executes comparable activities but uniquely compared to what is attained in the industry. In this standpoint, a firm's profitability or performance are determined exclusively by the arrangement and competitive dynamics of the business contained by which it functions

(Schendel, 1994). Researchers observed that the firm's performance was extensively dependent on the industry environment.

The Concept of Brand Trait

Brand according to the American Marketing Association is a "name, term, sign, symbol, or design, or a combination of them, projected to be acquainted with the goods and services of a given seller or assemblage of sellers and to distinguish them from those of competition. Brands are identified as indefinable material goods that are competent to generate profit mutually for internal and external stakeholders of a firm (Harcourt et al., 2020). Brands are therefore, all-pervading in contemporary settings since they are visible in man's daily existence (Kapferer, 2007; Klein, Palmer & Conn, 2000).

Businesses are persistently required to put together and deal with their brand to shield it against a untimely termination, since an express connect amid having possession of a brand and financially viable results no longer exists (Herbig & Milewicz, 1993). The place of every brand contributes to the materialization of brand-specific reflections in the customer mindsets which, has effect on customers' purchasing decisions (De Chernatony, 1999; Keller & Lehmann, 2003). Therefore, brands are ever better thought-out to constitute significant wherewithal consenting to firms to achieving competitive advantage in excess of their rivals (Keller, 2008). Keller (2008) recognized four prime dimensions of brand traits; this include brand Excitement, brand sincerity, brand excitement, brand sophistication, and brand toughness. This present study adopts brand sincerity and brand toughness as the dimensions of brand traits.

Brand Sincerity

Brand sincerity is the second dimension of brand traits and involves genuine, honest, wholesome and cheerful come to mind when thinking of the traits associated with this dimension. With so many advertising outlets currently available to a brand from traditional print to marketing through social media, today's public is more skeptical than ever when it comes to a brand's true level of sincerity. Day in, day out, consumers are inundated with brand messaging throughout the day, social media activity streams flooded with special events promotions, discounts, and contests to win free products or services. Unfortunately, too many of these brand messages provide very little value to consumers, thereby tainting public perception on whether brand sincerity is closer to being an oxymoron than an attainable personality trait for a brand.

Brand Toughness

Brand toughness is the fourth dimension of brand traits and it involves dominant, vigorous, intoxicating feelings that come to mind when reflecting of the traits linked with this dimension. Brand toughness is an attitude that consumers held toward a particular brand which include their ability to think, feel, and behave with regards to the particular brand (Rubin, 1973). This was found to influence other brand-related concepts such as brand loyalty and word-of-mouth. The ability of an individual to recognize and yearn of some brand is one of the variables of decision, so that consumer has a sense of willingness to purchase the same product or brand continuously over time. It has also been acknowledged that the relationship that leads to brand toughness is deep and enduring, thus rendering the brand toughness to be irreplaceable (Albert & Merunka, 2013). Fournier (1998 in Albert, Merunka, & Valette-Florence, 2008) suggests how the customers form and maintain strong relationships with brands. He notes that in total there are six major categories of relationships

that customers can have with a brand, including brand love. Brand love is said to be more meaningful and long-lasting than a mere preference that the customers have toward the brand. Brand love can act as a motivator in forming and maintaining close relationships with the companies (Reimann, Castaño, Zaichkowsky & Bechara, 2012). Love is linked to positive emotions (Fehr & Russel, 1991 in Albert et al, 2008; including pleasure which could influence the duration of relationship that a customer can have with a brand (Albert *et al.*, 2008). Brand love can build consumer willingness to involve integration of a brand become consumer's identity (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006). Consumers who love a brand will become invested in the brand, similar to how they would be with the loved ones (McEwen, 2004). When a consumer loves a brand, the brand will shape a consumer's identity to be similar to what the brand is perceived as. Brands that are lovable are likely to have stronger brand loyalty and competitive advantage (Yang, 2010). Brand love was also proven to increase patronage intentions (Vlachos & Vrechopoulos, 2012).

Brand Performance

Performance is an elemental construct in the strategy literature and can be highlighted at the level of individual managers, teams, businesses and conglomerates (Ikegwuru & Harcourt, 2019). Brand performance refers to the interconnected measurement of brand success in the marketplace. O'Cass and Ngo (2007) defined brand performance as the comparative measurement of the success of the brand in the marketplace. This is because, brand performance can also be perceived in the brand succeeding the firm's reputable aspirations for them in the marketplace.

Keller and Lehmann (2003) identified market share as a measure of brand performance, seeing that brand success is fashioned with towering market share, and again, market share has been extensively employed in the marketing research as a dependable indicator of brand success (Weerawardena *et al.*, 2006; Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001; Roth, 1995 Smith & Park, 1992). Similarly, sales volume has also been identified as a measure of brand performance as it echoes the intensity of instant balance of revenue from customers (Lassar, 1998). Sales volume is also extensively employed in the marketing literatures (Weerawardena *et al.*, 2006; Bronnenberg & Sismeiro, 2002; Julian & O'Cass, 2002). In fact, when one focuses on a specific brand and investigates its market share, sales volume It is thus, imperative for market-driven firms to focus on substantial measurement metrics to attain brand performance, since market-driven firms are positioned by virtue of their aptitude to endlessly sense and take actions on proceedings and developments in their markets (Slater & Narver, 1996; Jaworski & Kohli, 1993).

Brand Price Sensitivity

Price sensitivity is one of the key factors affecting to companies pricing choices as well as its ultimate profitability. Price sensitivity refers to the extent to which individuals perceive and respond to changes or differences in prices for products or services (Monroe, 1973). Price research has typically focused on routine decisions in response to changes in price (Bucklin, Gupta, & Han, 1995), price format (Dhar & Hoch, 1996), or price framing (Lichtenstein & Bearden, 1989). Price sensitivity is an individual difference variable describing how individual consumers show their reactions to changes in price levels. Price Sensitivity is the awareness of the consumers to what they perceive about the cost within which they will buy a particular product or service. Each customer will have a certain price acceptability range and different customers have different limits in their perceptions of what price is within their

ranges. Customer perceptions of price and their responses to price indicate whether a market is very price sensitive or not. Generally, marketers and researchers are familiar with the concept of price elasticity. If the changes in price have a proportionately greater impact on demand for a product then it is known as elastic demand. On the other hand, inelastic demand narrates the situation where changes in price have a little effect on the demand. The concept of price elasticity illustrates the aggregate response of a market segment to price levels. Pricing strategies and buyers' responses to prices have received a great deal of scholarly attention (e.g. Monro, 1990; Nagle, 1987), but most of these researches have focused on the aggregate response of the market, price elasticity, and not on individual consumer response (Gatignon, 1984; Kanetkar et al., 1992).

Brand Alignment

Brand alignment occurs when the identity and image of a brand are homogeneous. Zeithaml and Bitner (2000) introduced the services marketing triangle that can be considered as a framework which aligns communication flows in an organization. It was developed to apply to service organizations. As a tool for understanding the quality, the services marketing triangle postulates that quality is a function of the interaction between a services firm and two populations: service consumers and service employees.

Based on a review of practical examples, Srivastava & Thomas (2010) created the alignment framework suitable in this study. A reliable accomplishment of this framework will result in brand alignment. The framework incorporates three brand communication flows that must be associated: 1. Brand visionaries making promises regarding value propositions to end-consumers. 2. Internal marketing by brand visionaries to brand providers, to aid promises regarding value propositions. 3. Interactive marketing to consumers, delivery of value propositions by brand providers.

A strong brand provides a dependable interface of the same ideas between these three groups. Organizations need to generate both internal and external alignment of strategy and execution (Srivastava & Thomas, 2010). External marketing is the marketing from both the brand visionaries and brand providers, towards external customers. Internal marketing is inward facing marketing. It is used by organizations to motivate all functions to satisfy customers. Reflecting on this framework it can be said that it is far easier to convince external customer to believe in the brand if internal stakeholders believe in the brand. The framework of Srivastava & Thomas (2010) shows an answer on the question how to align the identity and image of a brand. Brand alignment can be achieved by well implemented internal marketing (Srivastava & Thomas, 2010).

Empirical Review

Roustasekehravani, Abubakar, Azam and Pooladireishahri (2014) examined the brand personality, customers' satisfaction and loyalty in the banking industry by means of comparative methods employed in data gathering. Data was analyzed with the aid of t-test on the mean of three groups and the study found a significant difference between the independent and dependent variables.

Pierre, Haythem and Dwight (2011) investigated brand personality and sales promotions on brand equity commercial banks clients in Jordan. The study adopted two dimensions of competence: ruggedness and sales promotions on top of customer satisfaction the dependent

variable. The simple regression analysis and t-test statistics were used for data analysis. The study revealed that ruggedness and sales promotions statistically and significantly influence brand equity.

Louis and Lombart (2010) considered the influence of brand personality and foremost relational consequences on customer loyalty of mobile telephone subscribers in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia by means of a descriptive and cross-sectional method. The population embraces students and staff of Faculty of Management, University of Technology, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, and the stratified sampling technique was used to derive a sample of 321. Descriptive statistics and factor analysis, correlation and regression tests were used to analyze data). It was revealed that brand personality significantly influence customer loyalty, directly and partially moderated by firms responses and mediated by service quality in mobile telephone firms.

Magin, Algesheimer, Huber and Herrmann (2003) looked at brand excitement and customers' satisfaction of customers of internet service providers in media industry, Johannes Gutenberg by means of an ex post facto technique and assumed the questionnaire to assemble data. Data analysis was executed through the use of the Spearman's rank order correlation. The study discovered that brand excitement has a strong positive interaction with customers' satisfaction, and concludes that customers' satisfaction is brand excitement as a feasible peculiarity of brand significantly influences customers' satisfaction personalization and recommends that ISP support responsive and courteous and sincere customer service to congeal customers' affiliation with the company.

From the review of literature, the following operational model of brand traits and brand performance was designed:

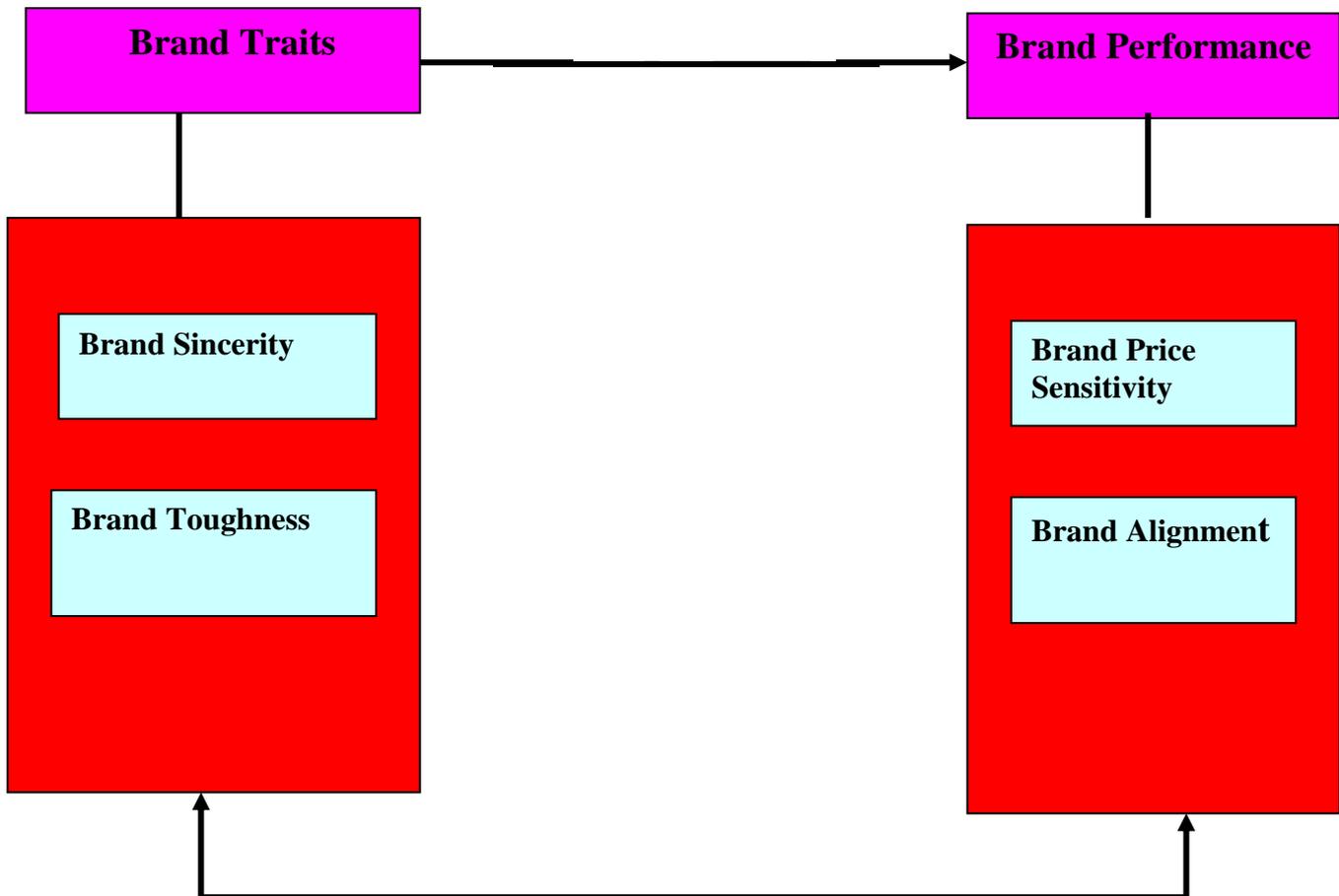


Figure 1 Conceptual Framework of Brand Traits and Brand Performance.

Source: Keller & Lehmann (2003).

METHODOLOGY

The researcher adopted the descriptive research design to examine the relationship between brand traits and brand performance of automobile marketing firms in south-south, Nigeria. The population of this study consists of 217 automobile marketing firms registered with the Ministry of Commerce and Industry in three (3) states (Rivers, Aqua Ibom and Bayelsa) of the South-South geopolitical zone of Nigeria as at 2016/2017 edition. To arrive at the sample size for the study, the Taro Yamane's formula for determining sample size as portrayed in the works of Kelechi (2008) in Ogbadu (2009).

Thus the formulae $n = \frac{N}{1 + N(e)^2}$

Where n is the sample size

N is the population

1 is constant and

e is level of significance (i.e. 0.05).

Therefore; $n = \frac{217}{1 + 217(0.05)^2}$

$$n = \frac{217}{1 + 217(0.0025)} = \frac{217}{1 + 0.6775}$$

$$n = \frac{217}{1.677} = 129$$

The sample size of this study was 129. The simple random sampling technique was used to determine the respondents. A sample of 129 automobile marketing firms was used for the study, where 2 executives were chosen randomly from each of the 129 automobile marketing firms to make up the total number of 258 respondents. The executives of automobile marketing firms were chosen because they can elicit information relating to brand performance. 258 copies of questionnaire was administered to the respondents. Of the 258 copies of questionnaire that were distributed to the respondents, 235 copies were returned, yielding a response rate of 91 percent. The remaining 23 copies produced and distributed were not returned and were unaccounted for. However, the return rate of 91% is considered high and outstanding considering a minimum return rate of 70% as suggested by Kothari (2011). The study used the simple regression analysis to test the four hypotheses of interest by means of the statistical package for social science (SPSS) version 22.0 package.

Model Specification

Brand traits are estimated as influencing brand performance, such as brand sincerity and brand toughness. This is expressed in the form of an equation as follows:

$$y = f(X_1, X_2, X_4) \quad \text{equation (1)}$$

Where

$$\begin{aligned} y &= \text{Brand Traits} \\ X_1 &= \text{Brand Sincerity} \\ X_2 &= \text{Brand Toughness} \\ X_4 &= \text{Brand Performance} \end{aligned}$$

$$\text{Therefore } y = a_0 + b_1X_1 + b_2 X_2 + e_t \quad \text{equation (2)}$$

Where

$$\begin{aligned} y &= \text{Brand Traits} \\ a_0 &= \text{Intercept (constant)} \\ b_1 &= \text{level of influence of brand sincerity on brand performance} \\ b_2 &= \text{level of influence of brand toughness on brand performance} \\ e_t &= \text{error term} \end{aligned}$$

The above estimated equation is a linear function which was used in testing the model separately and jointly.

ANALYSIS

Test of Hypotheses

Decision Rule

Significant/probability value (Pv) < 0.05 (level of significance = conclude significant influence.

Significant probability value (Pv) > 0.05 (level of significant = conclude insignificant influence.

Influence of Brand Sincerity on Brand Price Sensitivity

Table 1: Influence of Brand Price Sincerity on Brand Price Sensitivity (N=200).

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the estimate
1	.872	.764	.703	45343

- a. Predictors: (Constant), Brand Sincerity
 b. Dependent Variable: Brand Price Sincerity

Since for hypothesis one, the significant is .000 which is less than 0.05; there is a significant, influence of brand sincerity on brand price sensitivity.

Influence of Brand Sincerity on Brand Alignment

Table 2: Influence of Brand Sincerity on Brand Alignment (N=200).

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the estimate
1	.810	.656	.653	.50668

- a. Predictors: (Constant), Brand Sincerity
 b. Dependent Variable: Brand Alignment

Since for hypothesis two, the significant is .000 which is less than 0.05; there is a significant, influence of brand sincerity on brand alignment.

Influence of Brand Toughness on Brand Price Sensitivity

Table 3: Influence of Brand Toughness on Brand Price Sensitivity (N=200).

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the estimate
1	.983	.963	.963	2.6751

- a. Predictors: (Constant), Brand Toughness
 b. Dependent Variable: Brand Price Sensitivity

Since for hypothesis three, the significant is .000 which is less than 0.05; there is a significant, influence of product quality on organizational performance.

Influence of Brand Toughness on Brand Alignment

Table 4: Influence of Brand Toughness on Brand Alignment (N=200).

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the estimate
1	.776	.603	.553	.08878

- a. Predictors: (Constant), Brand Toughness
 b. Dependent Variable: Brand Alignment

Since for hypothesis four, the significant is .000 which is less than 0.05; there is a significant, influence of brand toughness on brand alignment.

DISCUSSIONS

Basically, brand traits are substantive factors that affect brand performance. Brand traits are significant as indicators that augment brand performance. A very vital step in guaranteeing brand performance is to understand brand traits status and address it correctly. As it is in our expectation and indeed supported by our findings, brand traits has significant influence on brand performance. Thus, the first and second hypotheses sought to determine the effect of brand sincerity on brand price sensitivity and brand alignment using the simple regression analysis. The hypotheses were stated in the null form, statistically tested and rejected. The alternative hypotheses that brand sincerity significantly influence brand price sensitivity and brand alignment were accepted. The concept of brand sincerity as measured in this study dealt with issues bordering on brand sincerity as a positive driver of brand performance. It becomes clear that brand sincerity makes brand price sensitivity and brand alignment efficient and thus capable of delivering reliable outcome. From our findings, we understand that when brand sincerity is properly regulated and positively handled, it rubs on positively on brand price sensitivity and brand alignment. Our finding agrees and supports the findings of Louis and Lambert (2010) who found a significant influence of brand personality on customer loyalty within mobile telephone companies was both directly and partially moderated by firms' responses and mediated by service quality.

It was hypothesized in the third and fourth hypotheses that brand toughness does not significantly influence brand price sensitivity and brand alignment. Our finding confirms a significant influence of brand toughness on brand price sensitivity and brand alignment. If organizations display sound knowledge of the positive effect of the brand toughness towards brand price sensitivity and brand alignment, they will certainly achieve optimal brand performance. Thus, knowledge of the positive impact of the brand toughness on brand performance should be persistently considered and reflected upon by all stakeholders in the automobile industry. Our research finding is supported by Pierre *et al.* (2012) who found that there is a statistical significant impact of the dimensions of brand personality on brand equity.

Brand traits are strategically important to brand performance and business organizations in industries and the study provides evidence of the ways in which business organizations strike various balances in brand traits and to brand performance. In the broadest sense, this study makes it clear why it is useful to take a broad view when handling brand traits. More specifically, these brand traits types may offer descriptive and prescriptive strategic shorthand" for firms developing appropriate strategies to influence brand performance, and an understanding of the implicit and explicit tradeoffs involved in brand decisions and practices. This research project offers sensitive contributions to the brand traits management literature, with its examination of business-enabled transformation using brand traits components. First, the study demonstrates how automobile marketing firms responded to poor brand performance by employing brand traits. It highlights how the utilization of brand traits can help automobile marketing firms overcome negative tendencies associated with brand performance and transform their companies. Second, the study examines how a critical examination of brand traits by managers of automobile marketing firms helps sense, seize, and reconfigure their resources to improve brand performance.

CONCLUSION

This work focused on investigating the influence of brand traits on brand performance in automobile marketing firms in South-South, Nigeria. It is evident from the findings that there is implicit relationship between brand traits and brand performance. The results of the quantitative analysis demonstrate that there is sufficient evidence to show that brand traits components (brand sincerity and brand toughness) adopted by automobile marketing firms affect their brand performance through in South-South, Nigeria. The null hypotheses stated were all statistically measured and rejected, indicating that brand traits affect brand performance of automobile marketing firms in South-South, Nigeria. Thus the components of brand traits as defined by the current study were positively associated with brand performance. It makes sense to contend that the components of brand traits identified in the study have the potential to trigger brand performance in automobile marketing firms in South-South, Nigeria. The study therefore concludes that, brand traits significantly influence brand performance of automobile marketing firms in South-South, Nigeria.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of the study, we proffer the following recommendations:

1. Managers of automobile marketing firms should position strategically, brand sincerity as identified by this study to brand performance, since the study unveiled its statistical significant influence on the metrics of brand performance (brand price sensitivity and brand alignment).
2. Management of automobile marketing firms should be skilled in packaging the components of brand traits identified by this study to relate genuinely with brand performance. This implication is necessary because the study revealed that the components of brand traits were significant in predicting brand performance
3. Besides, the study recommends that management should adopt the operational framework of this study which has been developed and translated into practical guidance for managers. This operational framework provides specific boosters for creating the success of brand traits in predicting positively brand performance.
4. Finally, in order to enhance brand traits, managers of automobile marketing firms should design brand traits boosting programs that are capable of enhancing positive brand performance.

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