SEARCH ENGINE MARKETING AND CUSTOMER SATISFACTION OF DOMESTIC AIRLINE IN RIVERS STATE

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the relationship between search engine marketing and customer satisfaction of domestic airline in Rivers State. Used in the study theoretical underpin are Diffusion of Innovation Theory and Technology Acceptance model. Descriptive research design was adopted in accessing the research subjects. While the population of the study comprised of 547,972 passenger traffic of airlines in Nigeria, a sample size of 400 was determined with the help of Taro Yamene formular. Descriptive statistics such as tables, charts, percentages, averages etc. Spearman Rank Correlation Coefficient was used to test the hypothesis. Cronbach Alpha test was used as a measure of reliability while face validity was conducted in order to scrutinize the instrument of the various constructs. The results indicated a significant positive and strong relationship between content placement and customer engagement. Based on the findings in the study, it was concluded that the dimensions of search engine marketing (content placement, search engine optimization) significantly relate to the measure of customer satisfaction (Customer engagement). This research has proffered solution to contemporary issues confronting the aviation industry. Strategists of airline firms should pay adequate attention to digital content creation and deployment especially on all digital fonts. Management should strongly optimise their search engine systems; which in-turn improves user loyalty and positive WOM.

Keywords: Search Engine Marketing, Customer Satisfaction, Content Placement, Customer engagement

INTRODUCTION

Aviation sector plays a vital role in facilitating economic growth and development, and provides numerous economic and social benefits. The air transport (aviation) industry consists of activities that directly involve transporting people and goods by air, which includes airlines, airports and general aviation services (International Air Travel Authority, IATA, 2018). Some of the main economic impact of aviation arises from its ability to generate employment opportunities, wealth and effectively supporting global businesses and tourism and offers countries, especially developing ones, the opportunity to facilitate trade and enable linkages in the global supply chain. According to Air Transport Action Group (ATAG, 2014) the global economic impact of aviation (direct, indirect, induced and catalytic) is around $2.7 trillion, equivalent to 3.5% of the world's gross domestic product (GDP) and the aviation industry generates 62.7 million jobs around the world (National Bureau of Statistics, 2019). This suggests that aviation forms a very significant part of the global economy through generating jobs directly and indirectly and providing a transportation platform for global businesses to grow. In addition, it has catalytic effects in areas such as trade, tourism and consumer welfare. Therefore, its role in facilitating economic growth in developed and developing countries cannot be overemphasized.

Increasingly, the advancement of Information & Communication Technology (ICT) has changed a lot of things, including the way people live in the society. The proliferation of internet-based technologies as well as the growing prominence of digital marketing techniques as main stream communication, organizations have generated a wide range of strategic implications for businesses in general as well as for the travel and airline industries in particular (Adjei & Noble 2010; Lin et., al., 2013). This strategic prowess of digital technologies has forced airlines to re-think their strategy on technological innovations, thereby paying more attention to digital tools in their quest to build competitive advantages in the industry. Airline operators have identified digital technology as a major opportunity to tackle changing customers' expectations effectively, manage customers' experience, and to reengineer the structure of the industry (Nkpurukwe, et al, 2020; Nielsen Smartphone, 2018).

From a strategic point of view, airlines use digital marketing technology to develop and manage their business model as well as to monitor both internal and external environment, conduct competitors' analysis, predict demand, and design desirable products. By communicating to relevant stakeholders, including travellers, with mobile websites and other web-based digital tools; airlines can save substantial amount of expenses, and at the same time, engage customers in real-time, enhance service experience and evoke electronic Word-of-mouth (Olsen & Connolly, 2010). According to Berson et., al., (2000), in way of promoting airline brands, digital marketers deploy tools such as mobile applications, e-mail marketing, social media marketing, web page marketing, search engine ads, and other new media platforms. Interactive marketing, online marketing, e-marketing and web marketing are the other alternative terms used for digital marketing strategies (Chaffey et al., 2009).

More so, the transformation of customer experience in particular and the aviation sector in general, is the cornerstone of digital transformation. With the help of digital marketing technologies, advertising practitioners now prepare numerous direct, online and experiential campaigns in order to create profitable relationship with customers. According to Nwokah and Gladson-Nwokah (2016), the rapid growth of online marketing has given a new dimension to the customer shopping experience. Hence, the influences of internet technologies in influencing customer purchase behaviour. These internet campaigns also include niche database advertising and award-winning card layouts, digital tape ads, pay-as-you-go online, rich text ads, branded web sites, viral ads, branded social networks, in-game ads, interactive & entertainment ads, SMS texts, online blogs, text, and e-mail (Berger & Milkman, 2012).

Fundamentally, the application of search engine marketing strategies in recent years has helped organizations in reaching out to massive audience and has impacted positively on customer satisfaction. According to Adede *et., al*., (2017), digital marketing is a process that is used to identify, anticipate and satisfy customers using internet technology. To Joseph (2012), the strategy refers to all the activities of advertising, promotion that is geared towards deciding the look and feel of the product, how it will be sold and sent to the customer. Hence, airline operators have identified digital marketing strategies as a major opportunity to manage changing customers' expectations effectively; customers' service experience; and to reengineer the overall business model in order to accommodate digital innovations (Nkpurukwe, et al, 2020; Nielsen Smartphone, 2020; Nkpurukwe, et al, 2022).

Statement of the Problem

Fulfilling customers' expectations of service performance is arguably a major accomplishment by airline operators. Though, achieving this goal in post Covid-19 makes it a

more herculean task for management. The aviation sector is one of the worst hit by the pandemic in Nigeria and a lot of players therein are making efforts to bounce back strategically. The health crisis was reported to have negatively affected customers' patronage, trust, and fulfilment. Evidently, there is a more than 30% decline of sales largely due to the pandemic, thereby resulting to increasing competition in the sector (Federal Airport Authority of Nigeria; FAAN reports, 2020). This development is however perceived to usher in new business models to effectively outsmart competitors and build competitive advantages.

Consequently, a key business model that could help airlines had been reported to be digital marketing by Philips Consulting (2020). The group suggests that digital marketing technique is a reliable means through which airlines can cushion the effect of the pandemic and re-build customers' trust while improving e-WOM among passengers. Again, the group reported the problem of "customer-switching behaviour" to different airlines thereby reducing customer loyalty to a particular airline. The issue of customer-switching behaviour (also known as passenger churn) means constant switching from one airline to another, which in-turn, decreases the level of passenger patronage and loyalty due to increase in the propensity of passenger to cease doing business or patronizing a particular airline; has posed a challenging trend among operators in Nigeria. Many airline customers frequently churn one operator to another in search of better-quality services that are affordable (Oyataye, Adebiyi & Amole, 2015).

Moreover, when the churn phenomenon occurs, the firm experiences a potential risk of considerable loss of customers, sales, and profit. According to them, 62% of passengers of airlines strategies that they switch to other operators due to safety, service quality, and inconsistent ticket pricing issues. While the remaining 38% attribute theirs to time consciousness and effective communication. Issues of this nature resulted to declined patronage and preference of customers (Phillips Consulting, 2017). In view of the above challenges and with reports of possible solutions, this research seeks to find out if deploying search engine marketing such as content placement could lead to customer engagement as it affects airlines in Nigeria. In essence intends to examine whether search engine marketing strategies could lead to improved customer satisfaction. Hence, this is the thrust of the research.
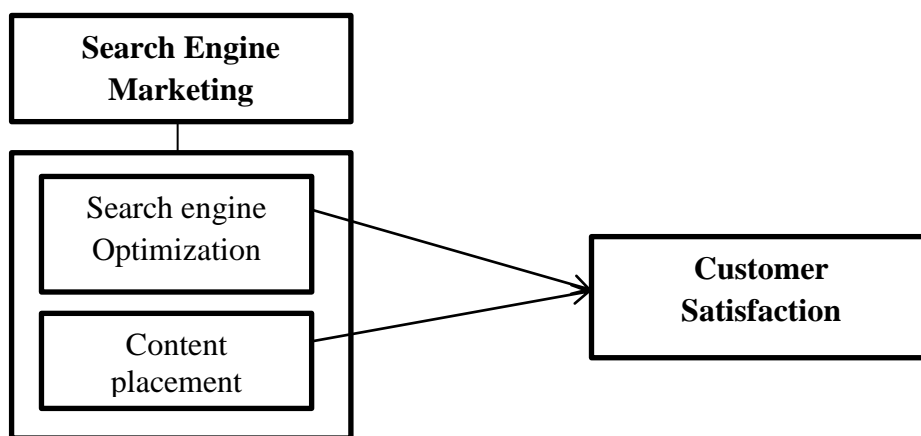
Conceptual Framework

Figure 1.1: Conceptual framework of the relationship between search engine marketing and customer satisfaction.
Source: Nkpurukwe, *et al*, 2022; Nkpurukwe, *et al*, 2020; Nelson Smartphone, 2018.

Aim and Objectives of the Study

The main aim of this study was to examine the relationship between search engine marketing and customer satisfaction of domestic airline passengers in Rivers state. The specific objectives were to:

i.   examine the relationship between search engine optimization and customer satisfaction of Nigeria domestic airlines.
ii.   determine the relationship between content placement and customer engagement of Nigeria domestic airlines.

Research Questions

i.   What is the relationship between search engine optimization and customer satisfaction of Nigeria domestic airlines?
ii.   What is the relationship between content placement and customer engagement of Nigeria domestic airlines?

Research Hypotheses

H_{01}: Search engine marketing has no significant relationship with customer satisfaction of Nigeria domestic airlines.

H_{02}: content placement has no significant relationship with customer engagement of Nigeria domestic airlines.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Conceptual Review

Concept of Search Engine Marketing (SEM)

The concept of SEM has long been explored by many scholars. Sen (2005) argued that search engine marketing is the quickest developing promoting medium on the planet, anticipated to progress toward becoming many times more intense and powerful than customary media outlet. Search engines are the essential search tools utilized for data recovery on the Web. It has been assessed that most of Web clients utilize search engines to acquire data from the Web. According to Killoran (2013), SEM is the process of improving the visibility of a website through organic searches on a search engine results page through different ranking algorithms. SEM can be broken into four major categories, which include; key word/key phrase research and selection, getting the search engines to index the site, on-page optimization, and off-page optimization (Killoran, 2013). In addition to these techniques, companies optimize their website to ensure that once a website is visible, the user will want to stay on the page to eventually make a sale or to find information about product or service (Kritzinger & Weideman, 2013).

More so, search engine is complex software which may be compared to be a finder visiting to the various websites and their pages which help the searcher to find significant data (Kleinmuntz & Schkade, 2003). Search engine marketing (SEM) can be defined as a mechanism which allows the subscriber to get most appropriate results of his online search. SEM therefore helps marketers by displaying their respective programmes to the right people in the right place and right time. Marketers can advance the rankings of their advertisement

on the search-results pages by improving their quality score in order make them more significant and therefore more search engine compatible (Sen, 2005).

The search engines are kind of platform for virtual marketplace for the potential buyers and sellers. SEM is all about how to optimize websites with the aim to make seller's website more visible in search engines to grab the searcher's/audience's attention to website and boost traffic. Indeed, SEM is very broad term that it is almost impossible to explain, if someone tries to understand it at once. Overall goal of SEM is to bring website on top to search results (Alfano & Lenzitti, 2009). Although, the goal to bring a website among top ranked websites is not a dream that will come over-night. However, SEM is a long-term process which continues with life of websites. The SEM techniques make it possible to tell the targeted search engines what your website is about; finally, it gives you a nice way to get targeted user/customer to visit website through search results in targeted search engine.

This highlights the fundamental significance of website pages being recorded with web search tools. An essential system for any site proprietor is arranging how subscribers can discover their way to their specific website (Berman & Katona, 2013). The search engine acts as a mediator amongst subscribers and sites. It will likely furnish shoppers with links to the most noteworthy quality sites on the organic side. To rank sites, the web search tool scores every site on its assessed quality utilizing data assembled from the internet utilizing crawling calculations and information mining strategies.

Content Placement

In SEM campaign, clear visibility and access to the desired contents on each webpage is not only desired for website's users. Nevertheless, it is necessary to provide a good presentation of important contents of webpage to search engine (Berman & Katona, 2013). It would help search engines to crawl and index websites more effectively. Sometimes, important contents of website which we need to get indexed are hided from spiders; because the desired contents are placed below in the page that might not be included in search engine indices. Web developers make a similar mistake that they place important contents in way more and more accessible for website users; though, a user-friendly content placement might not be given you fruitful result of indexing. The placement of navigations to other webpage(s) in the beginning of webpage may cause spiders to switch to the next page and this cause spider to miss useful contents of current page. Therefore, it could be tricky to place contented on webpage in friendly way for both website's users and spiders. The placement of contents that are not search engines friendly like JavaScript should not place in the beginning of code (Killoran, 2013).

Concept of Customer Satisfaction

Literature on customer Satisfaction is so limited even though the concept is gaining momentum in recent years. The concept of customer satisfaction relates generally to consumer behavioural constructs, which measures the degree to which a customer feels satisfied about service delivery. According to Gartner (2019), airline operators strive to ensure that customer expectations are met, and service propositions are effectively combined and delivered better than competitors. The author further stated that to achieve customer fulfilment, alert airlines apply digital technologies in communicating with customers. In this way, it is expected that resources be utilize in delivering superior service faster and better than competitors; hence improving customers' experience.

In addition, Tarn (2005) stated that customer Satisfaction is a measure of how well customer need expectations are met or exceeded. Customer Satisfaction is best explaining where actual service performance is equal to/exceeds expected service performance. Giese & Cote (2000) described the concept from a value co-creation point of view. To this author, customer fulfilling is a business strategy that is anchored on creation of value for customers by determining, managing their expectations, and demonstrate the willingness and ability to satisfy their needs. Airline operators that are able to meet customer expectations of service performance improve profit than those that do not meet customer satisfaction. It is pertinent to mention that this research measured customer Satisfaction with customer engagement and E-WOM.

Customer Engagement

The concept has evolved among practitioners as well as academics. A collection of definitions suggests that there are differing conceptualizations of the term customer engagement. Practitioners look at customer engagement from the perspective of the organization and defined it as activities facilitating "repeated interactions that strengthen the emotional, psychological or physical investment a customer has in a brand" (Sedley, 2010). But academics in information systems look at customer engagement as the "intensity of customer participation with both representatives of the organization and with other customers in a collaborative knowledge exchange process" (Wagner & Majchrzak, 2007). A more recent framework of customer engagement in marketing segments existing customers based on their transactional relationship with a brand (Bowden 2009).

Bowden (2009) provided a conceptual framework of customer engagement that, although focusing only on existing customers, suggests that customer–brand relationships and strategies for engaging customers might differ based on whether the customers are first-time or repeat purchasers. Considerable conceptual and descriptive work on engagement across various disciplines exists. However, there are gaps as to what engagement means to marketing and its stakeholders. It is evident from the review of the literature that no agreement exists as to the exact nature of engagement and its role in marketing. However, practitioners appear to relate it to building relationships with customers through programs aimed at getting individuals involved with and connected with their brand. Thus, next we address how CE can aid in filling the potential gaps in RM research priorities.

Search Engine Marketing and Customer Satisfaction

Nelson Consulting (2014) analysed the adoption of search engine marketing with a view to evaluating its impact on customers' purchase intention. The group found that search engine marketing has a strong impact on customers' purchase intentions. John, et al, (2019) found that mobile advertising plays a major role in determining and shaping customers' buying behaviour.

Andreas, et al, (2019) carried out a study on academic excellence, website quality, SEM performance: Is there a Correlation? The purpose of the research was to study the extent to which a university's academic excellence is related to the quality of its web presence. In order to achieve this, a method was devised that quantified the website quality and SEM performance of the university websites of the top 100 universities in the Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU) Shanghai list. A variety of tools was employed to measure and test each website and produced a Web quality ranking, an SEM performance ranking, as well as a combined overall web ranking for each one.

Ravneet and Ajay (2018) investigated the impact of search engine optimization as a marketing tool. The data were gathered through questionnaire from the sample of 338 respondents who were selected by simple random sampling method mostly from the National Capital Region (NCR) of Delhi in India. The data collected from the respondents were loaded on SAS base for exploratory factor analysis and multiple regression analysis. Result indicated that search engine optimization has a positive and significant relationship with market share, brand recognition, product knowledge, brand awareness and image.

Theoretical Framework

Diffusion of Innovation Theory (Rogers, 2003)

This theory was propounded by Rogers in 2003. It is one of the oldest theories in communication that has been successfully applied in the field of social sciences. The theory explains, how and through repeated messages, why some individuals become aware of a message, and how they responded accordingly. As a construct, Rodgers (2003) explained innovation to mean an idea, practice, or object perceived as new by an individual or other unit of adoption (Rogers, 2003). Thus, the use of diffusion of innovation theory explains how innovation, in this context, new business ideas, products, and services, are communicated through specific channels and in a steady manner to members of a social system. Effective functioning of diffusion of innovation theory is anchored on four cardinal points, which are: the social system, innovation, communication channels, and time (Rogers, 2003). Dearing (2009) suggested the process of diffusion of innovation starts slowly and over time begins to accelerate positive communication.

Regardless of how successful the application of diffusion of innovation theory sounds, Degerli, et al, (2015) explained that individuals differ in their willingness to adopt a new idea or product. People are hesitant to make a change, and the process of innovation can be challenging to most managers in an organization. Diffusion of innovation can be negative or positive depending on the nature of the innovation (Raynard, 2017). Also, anticipated technological innovation consequences create uncertainty in the minds of potential adopters (Rogers, 2003). Marketers might experience challenges from those not receptive to change when applying the diffusion theory (Rogers, 2003). The objectivity of a diffusion model represents the level of an innovative idea among a given set of prospective adopters (Andreas, et al, 2019). Ideas for innovation are usually communicated over time via channels among multiple members of a precise social system by focusing on informal communication channels (Rotich et al, 2015). Diffusion theory centres on innovative information across a social system by incorporating time and processes to increase individuals and organizational acceptability (Uddin, 2013).

Empirical Review

The nexus between digital marketing strategies and customers' fulfilment has long been explored by many scholars to mention but a few:

Tomasi and Li (2015) research evaluated the influence of search engine marketing on SME performance. The impact of SEM on website and business performance was investigated using a multiple case study methodology. The study gave a quick structured survey to twenty-two SMEs who had a commercial relationship with a SEM consulting firm to acquire information about the organizations in the case study. The survey gathered information on businesses, their investments in and usage of SEM, as well as the impact of that use. It was

observed that search engines are now an important conduit for SMEs to grow their worldwide reach while additionally rivaling bigger organizations.

Nkpurukwe et al. (2020) examined mobile marketing strategies and customer patronage of mobile telecommunication services. While they examined 400 accessible telecom subscribers across the 4 major telecom operators which include; MTN, Glo, Airtel, and 9Mobile in Nigeria, the study adopted mobile website and Shot-Message-Service (SMS) as dimensions of mobile marketing strategies. The study found that both mobile website and SMS has a strong and positive relationship with customer patronage.

Kritzinger and Weideman (2013) studied the effect of adoption of digital marketing practices on customer satisfaction of the mobile telephony companies in Kenya. The objective of this study was to examine the effect of adoption of digital marketing practices on customer satisfaction mobile telephone companies in Kenya. Cross-sectional research design was used in the study. A total of 90 respondents served as the targeted respondents. Primary data generated using structured questionnaire were analysed using descriptive statistics and regression analysis. Result from the study showed that digital marketing influences customer satisfaction to a very great extent. The researcher recommended, among others that, the companies should use more social network marketing platforms to reach an even wider and diverse market; and partnerships arrangement should be considered for email marketing that other traditional means of sending messages to the firm's customers.

Khraim (2015) study investigated the impact of search engine marketing on the performance of companies using online advertisement in Jordan. The researcher personally handed questionnaires to 121 companies in Jordan. Analysis of regression was used together with factor analysis. The outcomes exhibit that though SEM association was not huge, the other three aspects were.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted the cross-sectional and quantitative method of investigation. Basically, this study focused on domestic airlines that have air operator's certificate issued by the Nigeria Civil Aviation Authority (NCAA). Consequently, there were a total of 14 functional domestic airlines operating in Nigeria gotten through www.travellersguide.com.ng. However, due to time and resource constraints, and the nature of the research, we targeted passengers of domestic airlines in the Port Harcourt international airport Omegwa, Rivers State. This was because passengers will offer a realistic view about the variables as well as their proxies (Search engine marketing strategies), and how they influence customer satisfaction and their behaviour towards airline services. On that note, the population of this study comprises of flight passengers in the Port Harcourt international airport, which according to FAAN (2020) has 547,972 passenger traffic.

Sample Size and Sampling Techniques

In view of the above population figure (547,972), this research adopted Taro Yamene formula in determining the sample size. The analysis was demonstrated below:

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

Where n   =   Sample size
     N   =   Target/Estimated population
     e   =   Level of significant (0.05)
     n   =   ?
     N   =   547,972
     e   =   0.05

$$n = \frac{547972}{1+547972(0.05)^2} = \frac{547972}{1+547972(0.0025)}$$

$$n = \frac{547972}{1370.93} = 400 \text{ (sample size)}$$

It is pertinent to mention that the research adopted convenient sampling technique in accessing and/or selected 400 persons/passengers' present at the airport within two weeks, who often use domestic airlines in their travelling needs. These selected individuals were administered copies of questionnaire.

Data Analyses Technique

This study adopted Spearman's Rank Correlation Coefficient. This tool was adopted in order to determine the relationship the independent and dependent variable. However, descriptive statistical tools such as mean, charts, tables, averages, percentages, etc.; were used to analyse the demographic profile of respondents. It is pertinent to mention that all analyses were aided with Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 22.

RESULTS

Table 1: Showing the Questionnaire Distribution Results

Questionnaire	Frequency	Percentage
Distributed	400	100
Retrieved	366	91.5
Not retrieved	34	8.5
Retrieved usable	332	90.7
Retrieved not usable	34	9.3

Source: Survey data, 2024.

Table 1 illustrates the questionnaire distribution and retrieval process for the study. As a result of certain observed blank or omitted entries as well as incomplete questionnaires, some of the questionnaires were deemed not useable and so were not included in the study. Out of a total of four hundred (400) copies of the questionnaire distributed, three hundred and sixty-six (366) copies representing a response rate of 91.5% were retrieved and 34 which represent 8.5% were not retrieved. Out of the three hundred and sixty-six (366) retrieved, three hundred and thirty-two (332) which represent 90.7% were usable, and thirty-four (34) which represent 9.3% were not usable.

Hypothesis 1

H$_{01}$: Search engine optimization has no significant relationship with customer engagement of Nigeria domestic airlines.

Table 2: Correlations

			Search Engine Optimization	Customer engagement
Spearman's rho	Search Engine Optimization	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.914
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.000
		N	332	332
	Customer Engagement	Correlation Coefficient	.914	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.
		N	332	332

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

The table 2 above shows the result of bivariate analysis carried out between Search engine optimization and customer Engagement of Nigeria domestic airlines. The result reveals a strong positive correlation between Search engine optimization and customer Engagement (rho = .914*) and this correlation is significant at 0.01 level as indicated by the symbol **. Based on this result, the null hypothesis (Ho$_1$) is rejected and the alternate hypothesis is accepted. This means that there is strong positive and significant relationship between Search engine optimization and customer Engagement of Nigeria domestic airlines.

Hypothesis 2

H$_{02}$: content placement has no significant relationship with customer engagement of Nigeria domestic airlines.

Table 3: Correlations

			Content placement	Customer Engagement
Spearman's rho	Content placement	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.932[*]
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.000
		N	332	332
	Customer Engagement	Correlation Coefficient	.932[*]	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.
		N	332	332

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

The table 3 above shows the result of bivariate analysis carried out between content placement and customer engagement of Nigeria domestic airlines. The result reveals a strong positive correlation between content placement and customer engagement (rho = .932*) and this correlation is significant at 0.01 level as indicated by the symbol **. Based on this result, the null hypothesis (Ho$_2$) is rejected and the alternate hypothesis is accepted. This means that

there is strong positive and significant relationship between content placement and customer engagement of Nigeria domestic airlines.

CONCLUSION

This study was designed to investigate the relationship between search engine optimization and customer engagement of domestic airline in South-South Nigeria. It held that search engine optimisation has become a crucial technology that drives enormous value to customers and users of a computerised device. It has helped to facilitate online transactions and positive reviews from customers. This is because customers are disposed to systems that are user-friendly and entertaining. However, digital marketing strategies are greatly affected by the prevailing orientation of the organisation. The study based on test results strongly held that there is positive relationship between search engine marketing and customer satisfaction, and that there is positive relationship between content placement and customer Satisfaction of Nigeria domestic airlines.

Consequently, it was recommended that owners and managers of airlines in Nigeria should understand and develop a holistic approach of implementing an overall search engine marketing covering social media programme, search engine marketing as this research has confirmed its strategic importance in improving customer Satisfaction of Nigeria domestic airlines. More so, strategists of airline firms should pay adequate attention to digital content creation and deployment especially on all digital fonts. This study has made us understand the strategic prowess of digital contents in impacting on customer Satisfaction of Nigeria domestic airlines and should be vigorously encouraged.

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