

VALUE CO-CREATION AND CUSTOMER LOYALTY OF APPAREL DESIGNERS IN POST COVID 19 NIGERIA: THE MODERATING ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA NETWORK

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the moderating role of social media network on the interplay between value co-creation and customer loyalty among apparel designers in post COVID-19 Nigeria. Hypotheses were formulated vis-s-vis theoretical background and conceptual models. A survey data of 183 experienced apparel customers were used as the research database. The study utilized the Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficient (PPMC) for the test of hypotheses while, Partial Correlation Statistical Tool was used for determining the moderating role of social media networks on the relationship between value co-creation and customer loyalty. Basically, it was discovered that there is a positive and strong relationship between value co-creation and customer loyalty. More so, there is a strong moderating effect of social media network on the relationship between value co-creation and customer loyalty of the studied apparel designers in post COVID 19 Nigeria. The findings revealed a positive and strong association between the variables. Based on the findings, the study recommends the continuous utilization of social media networks to engage existing customers and attract potential ones. More so, managing the value co-creation option is imperative to the success of a business.

Keywords: Apparel, Designers, Value Co-creation, Customer Loyalty, Social Media Networks.

INTRODUCTION

The rapidly evolving customers' taste, preferences, globalization of cultures and innovations in technology, as well as dynamic nature of the contemporary business environment coupled with new business concepts, formats, and activities of competitors have made it imperative for apparel designers to adopt strategies that elicit customer loyalty and confer sustainable competitive advantage. The aftermath of the novel corona virus was the complete shutdown of businesses globally. Most industries were affected although, the effect is industry specific as well as country specific (Shang, et al., 2021; Law & Vishwanath, 2021).

In Nigeria for instance, the earliest signs of the virus effect on the economy were the deepening of the already existing recession with the service industry experiencing the worst hit (Nasser, et al., 2023). The lockdown of businesses and movement restriction measures stemmed people's ability to go to work (Gursory & Chi, 2020). More so, the fall in oil prices which represents more than 80 percent Nigeria's exports and more than 50 percent of government revenue also contributed to worsening the economic downturn of the country. The effect of the corona virus (COVID-19) pandemic caused tremendous human suffering across Africa, particularly in Nigeria, and it will continue to hurt the continent's small and medium enterprises (SMEs) like the apparel designers (Jagu & Obaka, 2020; Ozigi & Umar, 2020). The apparel industry suffered tremendously due to the mobility restrictions of the pandemic.

The apparel industry is made up of designers that are non-affiliated, self-contained businesses (Idenedo & Ebebuwa, 2022); it encompasses of every kind of clothing, from sportswear to business wear, from value clothing to statement luxury pieces (Vardot, 2015). Global apparel market is estimated to reach a peak of \$1.94 trillion by 2027 (Smith, 2023). The high inflation of 2022 caused by the aftermath of coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic made cost of production to rise and invariably made consumer confidence in most apparel labels to fall (Adedapo & Adedeji, 2021). Studies have shown that one of the ways of increasing customers confidence in a brand is increased customer positive experiences (Idenedo & Ebebuwa 2022).

Otite and Dida, (2017) suggested that customers' exhibition of loyalty is anchored on their positive experiences with an organization's service contacts regardless of the quality-of-service delivery. Similarly, Sadia (2012) asserts that a strong positive customer experience increases customers' loyalty and creates hope of achieving sustainable competitive advantage. Value co-creation according to Paulo et al. (2020), creates an experiential environment in which consumers can have an active dialogue with an organization or allows the customers to co-construct the service experience to suit their context. Empirical investigations have shown that the utilization of social medial networks decreases information asymmetry and creates barriers to time and location for apparel designers-consumer interactions (Farzin, et al., 2022).As such, social media networks are assumed to have the capacity to moderate the interplay between value co-creation and customer loyalty; as it provides platforms for current and potential customers to easily interact with apparel designers thereby facilitating the exchange of information between them. Several studies have been carried out by different scholars on the connection between value co-creation and other variables in different sectors and different levels/scopes of analysis. Scholars such as (Farzin, et al., 2022; Mimmi 2022; Gaopeng et al. (2021; Mehran et al. 2021; Ercsey, 2017; Igwe et al. 2020; Marian, 2014; Nathalie, 2013) have studied the interactions between social network marketing, value co-creation, and consumer purchase behavior, however, none have considered these variables directly with customer loyalty and social media networks as a latent moderator for the link between value co-creation and customer loyalty in their studies.

This current study therefore, bridged this perceived gap in extant literature by empirically examining the extent of relationship between value co-creation and customer loyalty among apparel designers in Nigeria with particular reference to apparel designers in Southern Nigeria.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Framework and Hypothesis Development

Value Co-Creation

Value co-creation is a concept that is customer-centric; a variable that became popularized through the publication of scholars such as Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004), the introduction of the service-dominant logic (S-D logic) by Vargo and Lusch (2004), Bharti and Agrawal (2018), and Merz et al. (2018) and Kambil et al. (1999). The term value co-creation according to Bharti and Agrawal (2018), is a collaborative engagement process facilitated through physical or virtual interaction in a formal or informal network between two or more entities through participation for joint value creation or solution building for self or others. Bharti et al. (2015) as in Mimmi (2022) asserts that value co-creation as an activity or a philosophy where an organization collaborates with its customers to meet the customers' needs and acquire a long-term relationship while working toward a shared goal and creating. In value co-creation customers play active, albeit varying roles in the provision of service and the realization of benefits (Jillian et al., 2015; Ercey, 2017).

Customers as innovators contribute ideas and knowledge to new product design. As a source of competence, customers define value for themselves and co-create it. In the role of co-producers, customer's co-produce products by contributing to the development of the design specification, quality control, and marketing, while as promoters, customers advocate and spread positive word-of-mouth about the brand or product (Ercey, 2017). Co-creation is an imperative strategy in eliciting customer loyalty for the apparel designing sector (Korhonen & Kaarela, 2015).

Based on the twin theories; resource-based theory (RBT) and core competency theory (CCT) propounded respectively by Pemrose (2009); Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004); customers are seen as a resource for firm innovation as they provide new product ideas and solutions. An apparel designer that involves its customers through co-creation in her value creation will be better positioned to outsell its competitors. Involving the customer in the value creation process (Idenedo, et al., 2020) will bring about superior and un-substitutable capabilities; and enable the firm to achieve a sustainable competitive edge (Winnie & Francis, 2016). The theory of core competency argues that companies already compete during the creation of competencies and not only later in the market for products. It is claimed that instead of structuring a company around diversified business units and end-products, a company should be structured around a few core competencies because, core competencies are extremely difficult to copy and can easily be leveraged on other markets (Idenedo, et al., 2020). Value co-creation may be viewed as an apparel designer's competence because the involvement of the customers will bring about customer loyalty.

Customer Loyalty

The important position occupied by customer loyalty in a firm necessitates scholars' interest in the concept thus, improvement on customer loyalty has become an imperative focus of achievement for every organization (Bagdonienė & Jakštaitė, 2007; Khan, 2013; Idenedo & Goodie-Okio, 2022; Idenedo & Ebebuwa, 2022; Idenedo & Wali, 2022). Customer loyalty is not won by chance; research has it that, it is a function of satisfying customer's expectations because customers compare their subjective perceptions after purchasing a product/service with their expectations before the purchase decision (Achieve Global, 2008; Kotler & Keller, 2009; Khan, 2013; Idenedo & Goodie-Okio, 2022). This comparison according to Kotler and Keller (2009) leads to a situation of satisfaction if satisfaction exceeds expectations (customer enthusiasm). Though, the nexus between customer satisfaction and loyalty is not unswervingly comparative because the evaluation of satisfaction relative to the performance of the service provider or

product offered differs with customers (Kotler & Keller, 2009); this implies that customers can be satisfied but for different reasons.

Customer loyalty as asserted by Bruhn (2001) is part of a cause-effect sequence that involves processes from the initial contact with the client to the economic success of the organization. According to Bruhn (2001), the stages begin with the customer's first contact with the purchase of a product or service, comparing previous expectations with the product or service, and thereby assessing the level of satisfaction. If the customer's assessment is favorable or customer expectations have been exceeded, customer loyalty will be triggered and that will build his/her trust for the organization's offerings and willingness to patronize the same product/service in the future.

Customer loyalty is customers' predisposition to prefer one brand and its products over those of the competitors' is based on the satisfaction they derive from using the brand's products (Didia & Idenedo, 2017; Idenedo & Goodie-Okio, 2022) or other psychological, economic, or social reasons. Customer loyalty encourages consumers to shop more frequently, and consistently and often informs an increase in the volume or value of purchases (Sima & Elham, 2015). Customer loyalty is the willingness of customers to purchase the company's products, instead of those of competing brands; and maintain a profitable relationship with the preferred brand (Kendal, 2012; Mohammad et al., 2012; Inamullah, 2013).

Daffy (2009) explained further that, to gain customer loyalty, the organization should make sure its products or services meet and exceed customer expectations. By involvement, Daffy implies a relationship between the organization and the customer that will enhance their decision quality based on feedback from customers while affinity occurs when there is satisfaction and involvement. Daffy's loyalty equation was the premise on the notion that an increase in customer loyalty is possible if all resources and processes are focused on customers' needs and expectations and involving them in the process of discovering their needs and co-creating value makes them feel appreciated (Kotler & Keller, 2009).

Social Media Network

It is quite appropriate to associate the rapidly evolving customers' tastes and preferences with the globalization of cultures to innovations in technology. Social media as an innovation in technology based on Kaplan and Haenlein's (2010) definition, has impinged and modified users' cultures, tastes, and preferences as regards fashion design. According to Kaplan and Haenlein (2010), social media is a group of internet-based applications that is built on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0 and that allows for the creation and exchange of user-generated content. Similarly, Kietzmann et al. (2011) considered it a highly interactive internet-based platform that permits users to share, co-create, discuss, and modify user-generated content. Sahni and Appiah (2019) inferred that, social media websites permit two-way communications through the sharing of information and relationship building amongst users that is facilitated by second-generation web technology and its attendant design characteristics. Social media networks include; Facebook, Instagram, X, YouTube, LinkedIn, Myspace, amongst others. According to Statista, Globally, Facebook is the most widely used social media platform with 2.9 million monthly active users. It is followed closely by Youtube with 2.5 million monthly subscribers. Nigeria on the other hand, had 31.6 million active social media users as at January of 2023, with WhatsApp being the most popular platform used in the country, having close to 95% of users (World Bank, 2022). These social media platforms are highly interactive internet-based networks; thus, they are used by individuals and organizations to engage existing customers and attract potential ones.

Value Co-creation and Customer Loyalty

Farzin, et al., (2022) studied social network marketing, value co-creation, and consumer purchase behavior by combining PLS-SEM and NCA. The study revealed that social networking marketing positively and significantly influenced economic, enjoyment, and relational values. Mimmi (2022)

examined the levels of co-creation; that is, how sustainable fashion companies create value with their customers. The study shows that sustainable fashion companies implement and utilize co-creation practices with the customers at various stages of the economic, environmental, and social levels of their business models. Gaopeng et al. (2021) study demonstrates that customer involvement, co-creating design method, and collaborative product development mechanism are the essential aspects of the implementation of co-design in the fashion industry. Ercsey (2017) considered the role of customers' involvement in value co-creation behavior. The survey revealed that involvement influences the customers' mandatory behavior and volunteer behavior when working on a co-creation value. There appears to be a positive relationship between value co-creation, perceived customer orientation and product advantage. Therefore, this study hypothesized thus:

Ho1: Value co-creation has no significant positive relationship with customer loyalty among apparel designers in Nigeria post COVID -19.

The Moderating Role of social media on the Relationship between Value Co-creation and Customer Loyalty

There has been a paradigm shift of customers being seen as passive receivers of an offering towards the center of focus and being more active partners in value creation (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004). Improved technology adoption and social media platform have made consumers to have more information, choices, and opportunities now than ever, increasingly pushing companies to a customer-centric business approach (Mimmi, 2022). As the effect of COVID -19 continues to be on the pecuniary table for discussion due to its impact on the global economy, the expected changes, revolutions, and transformations of social-economic structures in this era of the contrasted economy are rooted in entrepreneurial marketing through science and technology (Anoke, et al., 2021).

Therefore, the growth, survival, and sustainability of SMEs requires satisfying peoples' need and want by dealing with hitches that are largely dependent on constant innovation, creation of products, evaluated processes, and adoption of workable methods. When pursuing new opportunities in a competitive market environment with limited resources, the entrepreneur must think outside the box, be creative and use advanced and radical approaches in the face of these challenges (Bharti et al. in Mimmi, 2022). To achieve this, however, the entrepreneur needs to have a fervent marketing vision of the whole entrepreneurial roles, duties, and functions.

Social media networks are assumed to have the capacity to moderates the interplay of value co-creation and customer loyalty as it provides platforms for current and potential customers to easily interact with companies thereby facilitating the exchange of information between them. Social media has been proven to be an efficient platform (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2011) for firms to communicate, interact and connect with their prospective and actual customers which in turn provides boulevards for customers to review the quality of products offered by firms, contribute valuable ideas, experience, and information based on their taste and preferences in the value co-creating process (Sahni & Kenneth, 2019). On this premise, the study hypothesized that:

Ho2: Social medial networks do not moderate the relationship between value co-creation and customer loyalty among apparel designers in post COVID -19 Nigeria

METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a correlational research design. A correlational research design investigates relationships between two variables (or more) without the researcher controlling or manipulating any of them. The customers of apparel designers in Port Harcourt; the capital of Rivers State constitute the population of the study; these participants were drawn through a mall-intercept procedure. This procedure

is beneficial in its ability to generate a large pool of respondents within a short time frame (Hair, et al, 2006). Efforts were made to eliminate the shortfall of this procedure by ensuring that the respondents selected were capable of filling the questionnaire. This is in line with the argument of Asika (1999) who asserts that a researcher must be guided appropriately by scenarios he considers as typical cases which are likely to provide him with much needed data or information. The questionnaire is the instrument used in collecting data for the study. The items in the questionnaire were presented using a 5 point Likert scale with 5 (strongly agree) and 1 (strongly disagree) being at the two extremes. This scale has the ability of providing participants with numerous options and is well suited for a self-administered questionnaire (Hair et al, 2006). ,,

Three constructs namely; value co-creation; customer loyalty and social media network were operationalized in order to test the proposed research framework. To check the reliability of the data used for the study, a Cronbach’s alpha test was conducted on the data. The test usually reveals the components that have the capability to be constant in replicated studies. According to De Veils (2003), the minimum threshold for ascertaining reliability for a Cronbach’s alpha test is 0.5. In this study, the Cronbach’s alpha value range of 0.700; this shows that the data displayed a high level of internal consistency and is reliable to provide the needed information (see Table 1). The Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficient (PPMC) was applied to check the degree of association between the value co-creation and customer loyalty while Partial Correlation Statistical Tool was used to determine the moderating role of social media network on the association between value co-creation and customer loyalty. The key to the interpretation of the strength of the relationship between the variables of the study considered appropriate is the categorization set by Dunn (2001). The interpretation process was subject to a 0.01 (two-tail) level of significance. Positive sign connotes a positive relationship, while negative sign means a negative relationship.

Table 1: Result of Reliability Analysis

Variable	Cronbach’s Alpha	Items
Value Co-creation	0.756	5
Customer Loyalty	0.733	5
Social Media Networks	0.735	5

Source: SPSS 20.0

DATA RESULT AND ANALYSIS

Table 2: Range of Correlation (r) Values and the Corresponding Level of Association

Range of Relationship values	Descriptive level of Relationship	Remark
0.00 - 0.19	Very Low	Very Weak
0.20 - 0.39	Low	Weak
0.40 - 0.59	Moderate	Moderate
0.60 - 0.79	High	Strong
0.80 - 1.0	Very High	Very Strong

Source: Categorization set by Dunn (2001)

Hypotheses Testing

Pearson’s Correlation Decision Rule

The null hypotheses should be rejected and conclude a significant relationship if the probability value (PV) < (0.05) Significance level. The null hypotheses should be accepted and conclude an insignificant relationship if the probability value (PV) > (0.05) Significance level

Table 3: Correlation Analysis of Value Co-Creation and Customer Loyalty

Control Variables		Value Co-Creation	Customer Loyalty
Value Co-Creation	Pearson Correlation	1	0.737**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	93	93
Customer Loyalty	Pearson Correlation	0.737**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	93	93

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Source: SPSS 22.0

Table 3 shows that Pearson's Correlation (r) = 0. 737**, this value is high, indicating a strong relationship between value co-creation and customer loyalty. The positive sign of the correlation coefficient means that a positive relationship exists between them. This implies that an increase in customer loyalty is associated with value co-creation in the studied apparel designers in Nigeria.

Hypothesis 1

HO₁: There is no significant association between value co-creation and customer loyalty among apparel designers in Nigeria

As shown above, the PV is (0.000), and this value is < (0.05) significance level, therefore the null hypothesis was rejected and the researchers conclude that a significant association exists between value co-creation and customer loyalty among apparel designers in Nigeria.

The Partial Correlation Decision Rule

There is a significant moderating influence if the variation between the Zero Order Partial Correlation (ZPC) and the Controlled Partial Correlation (CPC) > (0.01).

Partial Correlation of the influence of Social Media Networks on the Relationship between Value Co-Creation and Customers Loyalty

Correlations					
Control Variables			Value Co- Creation	Customers Loyalty	Social Media Networks
-none ^a	Value Co-Creation	Correlation	1.000	.737	.601
		Significance (2-tailed)	.	.000	.000
		Df	0	92	92
	Customers Loyalty	Correlation	.737	1.000	.699
		Significance (2-tailed)	.000	.	.000
		Df	92	0	92
	Social Media Networks	Correlation	.601	.699	1.000
		Significance (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.
		Df	92	92	0
Social Media Networks	Value Co-Creation	Correlation	1.000	.688	
		Significance (2-tailed)	.	.000	
		Df	0	92	
	Customers Loyalty	Correlation	.688	1.000	
		Significance (2-tailed)	.000	.	
		Df	92	0	

a. Cells contain zero-order (Pearson) correlations.
Source: SPSS 22.0

The statistics in the Table 3 established that a strong significant and positive relationship exists between value co-creation and customer loyalty $r = (0.737)$, $PV = (0.000) < (0.05)$. The table also shows that social media networks also have a significant and direct relationship with value co-creation and customers loyalty $r = (0.601)$, $PV = (0.000) < (0.05)$ and with customers loyalty $r = (0.699)$, $PV = (0.000) < (0.05)$ the positive sign of the r value is an indication that when social media networks are efficient and effective, value co-creation and customers loyalty also improves.

Hypothesis 2

HO₂: Social medial networks do not influence the association between value co-creation and customer loyalty among apparel designers in Nigeria.

The Zero Order Partial Correlation (ZPC) = (0.737), and Controlled Partial Correlation (CPC) = (0.699). The difference between the Zero Order Partial Correlation (ZPC) and the Controlled Partial Correlation (CPC) $(0.737 - 0.688) = (0.49 > 0.01)$ hence the null hypotheses were rejected and the researchers conclude that; there is a significant association between value co-creation and customer loyalty and social media networks significantly influence the association between value co-creation and customers loyalty. The positive sign of the difference is an indication that social media networks assert a positive influence on the relationship between value co-creation and customer loyalty.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

This study hypothesized that there is no significant association between value co-creation and customer loyalty and social media does not significantly influence the interplay between value co-creation and customer loyalty among apparel designers in Nigeria. However, the tested hypotheses as exhibited in Table 4 established that a strong and positive relationship exists between value co-creation and customer loyalty $r = (0.737)$, $PV = (0.000) < (0.05)$. The table also shows that social media networks also have a significant and direct relationship with value co-creation and customers loyalty $r = (0.601)$, $PV = (0.000) < (0.05)$, and with customers loyalty $r = (0.699)$, $PV = (0.000) < (0.05)$. These findings cohered with previous studies on value co-creation with other variables. For instance, the empirical investigations of

Farzin, et al., (2022); Gaoperg et al, (2021) and Mimmi (2022) all agree that value co-creation method is imperative for creating customer loyalty. In our discussion with some respondents on how value Co-creation adoption have helped in increasing their market share and customers' loyalty. On the whole, the responses from all the respondents revealed that innovation as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic and value Co-creation has helped them to increase their market share and retain their loyal customers. They equally noted that Covid-19 has affected their businesses in no small means which resulted in adopting new ways of doing their business.

Summary of Findings

There is a strong and positive relationship between customer value co-creation and customer loyalty while social media network moderates the relationship between value co-creation and customer loyalty.

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings, the study concluded that value co-creation and customer loyalty with social media networks significantly influence the relationship between apparel designers and their customers' loyalty in Nigeria.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The study makes the following recommendations: that apparel designers should continue to utilize social media platforms. Again, apparel designers that seek to build and sustain customer loyalty should consider value co-creation as imperative. Apparel designers should continue incorporating customers' views on the quality of products offered in order to gain and sustain competitive advantage within the industry locally and globally.

CONTRIBUTION TO KNOWLEDGE AND AREAS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

The apparel industry is a high touch services sector that encourages close and direct interaction between the customer and the service provider for a prolonged period of time. The provision of the social media networks tends to increase this fact as well as the co-creating aspect of value from the customer's viewpoint. The confines of this study include the fact that the sample size is small and as such, conclusion from the study was made with the greatest degree of caution, an increase in the database is a suggestion for further studies as well as specific variables that are related to customer loyalty. More so, the study did not take cognizance of demographics; subsequent studies should identify the demographics with particular interest in linking such demographics to expected outcomes such as customer loyalty. Subsequent research should identify the particular social media network that moderates the relationship between value co-creation and customer loyalty and lump the whole as one. ,,

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