

CUSTOMER SENSITIVITY AND COMPETITIVENESS OF OIL AND GAS FIRMS IN RIVERS STATE, NIGERIA**IBANGA** Ifeoma Blessing¹ **NADUBE** Paul M.² **ADIELE** Kenneth C.³^{1, 2, 3} Department of Marketing, Faculty of Administration and Management
Rivers, State University Nkpolu-Oroworukwo, Port Harcourt, Nigeria**Abstract**

This study investigated the relationship between customer sensitivity and competitiveness of oil and gas firms in Rivers State. This study adopted a survey research design with a correlational method of investigation and obtained quantitative data from respondents in a non-contrived setting. The population of the study comprised 9 registered and functional oil and gas firms in Rivers State. The study adopted a census and purposively drew 5 managers (Marketing, Procurement, Logistics, Business development and Research and Development) from each of 29 firms. In all, 145 managers constituted provided data for the study. Pearson Product Moment Correlation was used to test 3 hypotheses, relying on the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 23.0. The results showed that customer sensitivity has positive significant correlation with competitiveness of oil and gas companies in Rivers State. The study concludes that customer sensitivity leads to competitiveness of oil and gas companies in Rivers State; and recommends that management of oil and gas companies should prioritize the develop their customer sensing capabilities to boost their capacity to capture, analyse and respond to customer feedback and preferences in real-time in order to increase their level of competitiveness.

Keywords: Accessibility, competitiveness, customer sensitivity, delivery speed, product flexibility

Introduction

Organizations constantly face change-induced challenges. Globalization, rapid technological advances, competition, disruptive business models, emerging markets, and constantly evolving consumer preferences are some of these challenges. Combined with traditional business risks and economy lifecycles, these challenges force organizations to become more sensitive to consumers requirements (Kazlauskienė et al., 2017). Ateke and Didia (2017) states that at its most basic level, marketing represents firms' ability to sense and serve customers' requirements profitably.

Customer sensitivity is an organization's ability to understand, respond to, and anticipate the needs and preferences of its customers. This sensitivity is critical to maintaining and enhancing competitiveness, as firms that are able to effectively address customer demands can create stronger customer loyalty and differentiation in market (Simpson et al., 2004). In today's highly competitive business environment, organizations must prioritize customer sensitivity to ensure they remain relevant and responsive to changing consumer behaviors and expectations. Companies that focus on customer-centric strategies can better identify market trends and adjust their offerings to meet evolving customer needs, giving them a competitive edge over rivals (Porter & Kramer, 2006).

Sensitivity to consumers' preferences is not only essential to retaining existing customers but also to attracting new ones. As competition intensifies, firms must continuously innovate to cater to increasingly discerning customers (Ma, 2004). Moreover, the rise of digital technologies has empowered customers with more information and choices, making it even more important for businesses to maintain high levels of customer sensitivity. Research has shown that firms with a deep understanding of their customers' needs are more likely to implement successful competitive strategies, such as product customization and personalized marketing efforts, leading to improved market performance (Cousins, 2005).

Customer sensitivity coupled with strong customer service, can significantly enhance a firm's competitiveness. By effectively listening to, and acting on customer feedback, businesses can improve service quality and develop more relevant products, which in turn fosters customer loyalty and drives long-term growth (Nwulu & Nwokah, 2018). In this sense, customer sensitivity is not only a tool for survival but a strategic advantage in today's rapidly changing business landscape.

However, empirical examinations of the influence of customer sensitivity on competitiveness is scarce. Ateke and Harcourt (2023) studied market-sensing capability and innovativeness. Amangala and Ateke (2018) probed customer orientation of service employees and customer satisfaction. Ateke and Didia (2017) examined market sensitivity and business wellness. None of these studies focused on customer sensitivity in particular, and none looked at how sensitivity to market or customers relates to competitiveness. Thus, this study sought to contribute to literature by examining the influence of customer sensitivity on competitiveness of oil and gas firms in Rivers State.

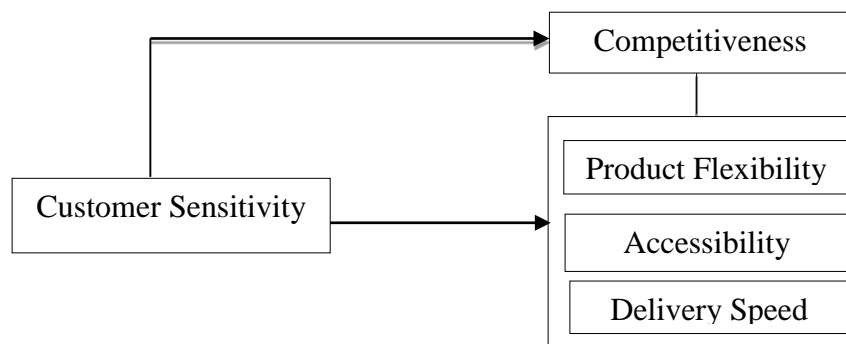


Fig.1 Conceptual framework of relationship between customer sensitivity and competitiveness

Customer Sensitivity Conceptualized

Customer sensitivity is the penchant of firms to quickly detect and respond to consumers' genuine interest. It is the propensity of firms to be driven, not by figures but by customers' value requirement (Christopher, 2000), with the end goal that as opposed to depending on past deals to estimate future deals, firms depend on direct feed-forward from customers through information on genuine client necessities (Ateke & Didia, 2017). There is an unavoidable change in techniques and working strategies of firms. Firms are embracing advances in technology to quicken their responsiveness to customers' evolving needs (Gunasekaran et al., 2008).

Consumers are ordinarily, unstable. The items that got their profound respect do not appeal to them today; and the items they run after today, will fail to speak to them tomorrow (Ateke & Nadube, 2017). Thus, firms must evaluate customers' requirements consistently, and change their tasks likewise (Takeuchi & Quelch, 1983), as any firm that fails to keep pace with changing consumer trends heads for calamity (Chen & Paulraj, 2004).

Fulfilling customers' requirements is the reason businesses exists (Doyle, 1994) and fundamental point of advertising (Dibb et al., 1994). The point subsequently is that, the more delicate a firm is to its consumer needs, the really engaging that firm will be to customers. Pleasing the customership is an obvious approach to out-manoeuvring contenders, since consumers are the pivot of firms' marketing programmes (Tan et al., 1999). Customer sensitivity is gauged by how much a firm

customizes its offerings to unique consumer preferences and their level of responsiveness to unpredictable market demand (Damien & Jokes, 2011; Christopher, 2006).

Concept of Competitiveness

Competitiveness is capacity to proactively perceiving market trends ahead of competitors and adjust supply according to this anticipation. Competitiveness can be based on different functional areas within the organization, including capacity to attend to smaller cycles of product deliveries; ensure product quality and reliability; and meet delivery timelines. One of the ways to increase competitiveness is to increase of productivity.

Competitiveness exists when a firm has a product that target customers perceive as better than that of competitors (Dess et al., 2019). The magnitude of a firm's competitiveness is the difference between the value it creates and the costs it incurs to produce them. Competitiveness manifest in the attainment of a competitive position that ensure superior and sustainable financial performance.

In order to achieve better performance, it is essential that organizations adopt strategic postures that aggressively provide them with a strong hold of their market. Competitiveness tilts a firm toward better adjustment to external conditions (Hitt et al., 2015); and is important in explaining variations in organizational profitability and long-term performance (Kang et al., 2012).

Competitiveness is a relative and multidimensional construct that is a composite of unique resources and capabilities that enable a firm successfully compete in an industry. In this study, competitiveness is decomposed into product flexibility, accessibility and delivery speed.

Product flexibility

Flexibility is described as a company's ability to modify its range of tactics and operations to the extent needed to implement its strategy. It is the amount of responsiveness (or adaptability) for any future change in product design, including new products and derivatives of existing products. Flexibility has become an issue that attracts a lot of attention from academics. A large literature has addressed flexibility as an important competitive advantage.

D'Souza and Williams (2000) classify flexibility into internally driven flexibility and externally driven flexibility. Internal flexibility includes process flexibility and material handling flexibility while external flexibility includes volume flexibility and variety. The need for flexibility is determined by business operations and environmental characteristics. Suarez et al. (1995) shows that markets experience instability, product life cycle has become shorter, and buyers have become smarter. These factors have contributed to the emergence of flexibility as a necessity. Other drivers of flexibility are uncertainty (Koste & Malhotra, 1999), global competition and advances in technology (Vokurka & O'Leary-Kelly, 2001).

Accessibility

Accessibility is the degree to which an organization and its products can be easily reached by customers. Accessibility is a paramount concern for firms that deal in fast moving consumer goods because consumers will prefer products that easily accessible. Drury et al. (2012) states that product accessibility reduce cost for consumers. It is also associated with sales growth and entry into new market (Mont et al., 2006). Thus, accessibility help companies create a competitive advantage in comparison (Beltagui, 2011). Furthermore, making product accessible leading to significant resource savings and reductions in marketing spend (Rifkin, 2000).

Delivery speed

Delivery speed refers to the extent to which an organization delivers goods or provides services at the appropriate time. Prior works identify delivery as an important element of logistics service and a significant driver of consumer loyalty (Dadzie & Winston 2005). Several studies have since examined a variety of delivery aspects in retailing. Lewis (2006) and Lewis and Fay (2006) showed that shipping fees significantly impact consumers purchase decisions regarding order incidence and order size.

Rao et al. (2011) indicated that delivery delays decrease consumer loyalty levels, consumers are quite sensitive to delivery time, and therefore, this factor has a strong impact on consumer satisfaction and repurchase intentions (Collier & Bienstock 2006). Consumers highly value delivery punctuality in retailing, including various options for delivery dates, and the ability to deliver orders quickly (Xing et al., 2017).

Delivery speed has been a subject of interest to researchers over the years. This is demonstrated in the number of studies on concepts related to on delivery speed. These include speed of delivery (Otim & Grover, 2006); on-time delivery (Collier & Bienstock 2006), delivery time (Campbell & Savelsbergh 2006), and delivery fees (Rao Goldsby et al., 2011),

Customer Sensitivity and Competitiveness

For the past three decades, the subject of customer sensitivity in one form or another has occupied the centre stage of theory and practice of marketing strategy. It has attracted immense attention from marketing academics. Customer sensitivity is focused on consumer needs, and provides continuously improvement that leads to superior value and customer satisfaction (Okumus, 2003, as cited by Udegbe 2017). Management theorist have long suggested that, key to success in business lies in understanding and providing what customer need, rather than focusing on what the firm has to sell.

Companies pursue customer sensitivity in order to enhance their performance and in search of differentiation. According Martin and Garbac (2003), Liu and Wang, (2009) and Zhou et al., (2009), customer sensitivity strongly influence business performance depending on environmental conditions, such as market turbulence, competitive intensity and technological advances.

Udegbe (2017) states that organizations that post superior performance are those that are sensitive to the needs and preferences of their customers. Liu and Wang (2009) on their part, argue that customer sensitivity impact supply chain performance of American Manufacturing firms. Also, Otchere (2013) and Hussain and Nassar (2010) found a negative significant relationship between customer sensitivity, and job satisfactions.

Based on the forgoing, it appears that there is a relationship between customer sensitivity and competitiveness. Yet, in view of the design of this study to conduct empirical analyses, the following hypotheses are formulated:

- H₀₁:** There is no significant relationship between customer sensitivity and product flexibility of oil and gas firms in Rivers State.
- H₀₂:** There is no significant relationship between customer sensitivity and accessibility of oil and gas firms in Rivers State.
- H₀₃:** There is no significant relationship between customer sensitivity and delivery speed of oil and gas firms in Rivers State.

Methodology

This study adopted a survey research design with a correlational method of investigation and obtained quantitative data from respondents in a non-contrived environment. The population of the study comprised 29 registered and functional oil and gas firms operating in Rivers State. The researcher adopted a census because of the small size of the population. The marketing, procurement, logistics, business development and research and development manager of each of the 29 firms constituted the respondents. In all 145 managers provided data for the study. Descriptive statistics was used at the univariate level of analyses, while Pearson Product Moment Correlation was used to test the hypotheses at the bivariate level of analyses.

Data Analysis and Results

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics on customer sensitivity

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Dev.
To what extent does your organization respond quickly to the changes in the market environment in terms of demand?	135	1.00	5.00	3.5556	1.13076
To what extent does your company constantly obtain market intelligence pertaining to current and future needs of customers?	135	1.00	5.00	3.5407	1.17666
To what extent is customer sensitivity measured in terms of products and services offered to the market?	135	1.00	5.00	3.2074	1.40413
To what extent does your company attend to changes in customer demand more efficiently than its competitors?	135	1.00	5.00	2.8444	1.38686
Valid N (listwise)	135				

Source: SPSS Output

The data in Table 1 illustrates that there is a high level of affirmation (where $x > 2.50$) as regards the indicators of customer sensitivity. The construct examined the context and manifestations of customer sensitivity within the target organizations with indicators aimed at examining respondents' perception of customer sensitivity. The results affirm to all four indicators of customer sensitivity within the organizations as also supported by the low disparity in response ($SD < 2.00$). The implication of these responses is that respondents are strongly of the opinion that customer sensitivity is an observed phenomenon in their organizations and hence are largely on the agreement range of the scale.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics for Product Flexibility

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Dev.
To what extent do your company's proactive strategies help in improving its level of competitiveness	135	1.00	5.00	3.6222	1.14518
To what extent does your organization make pre-emptive move to adapt to the changes in business environment.	135	1.00	5.00	3.6222	1.14518
To what extent does your company's ability to adapt to environmental changes increase its level of competitiveness?	135	1.00	5.00	3.5111	1.42926
To what extent does your company put in place flexible operational plans that accommodate unexpected challenges in business?	135	1.00	5.00	3.5407	1.37006
Valid N (listwise)	135				

Source: SPSS Output

Table 2 illustrates that there is a high level of affirmation (where $x > 2.50$) as regards the indicators of product flexibility as a measure of competitiveness. The construct examined the context and manifestations of product flexibility within the target organizations with indicators aimed at examining respondents' perception of product flexibility. The results affirm to all four indicators of product flexibility within the target organizations as also supported by the low disparity in response ($SD < 2.00$). The implication of these responses is that the respondents are strongly of the opinion that product flexibility is an observed phenomenon in their organizations and hence are largely on the agreement range of the scale.

Table 3: Descriptive Statistics for Accessibility

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Dev.
To what extent does your level of competitiveness depend on your product and service accessibility?	135	1.00	5.00	2.8074	1.29001
To what extent do you think that your company patronage level is enhanced because of its accessible disposition to customers?	135	1.00	4.00	3.0593	1.03493
To what extent is the high rate of competitiveness in your company hinged on how you are accessible to your customers?	135	1.00	5.00	3.5556	1.29676
To what extent is your company considered the best amongst rivals because of its swift and adaptable disposition to changes in business environment?	135	1.00	5.00	3.4667	1.29753
Valid N (listwise)	135				

Source: SPSS Output

Table 3 illustrates that there is a high level of affirmation (where $x > 2.50$) as regards indicators of accessibility as a measure of competitiveness. The construct examined the context and manifestations of accessibility within the target organizations with indicators aimed at examining respondents' perception of accessibility. The results affirm to all four indicators of accessibility within the target organizations as also supported by the low disparity in response ($SD < 2.00$). The implication of these responses is that the respondents of oil and gas firms in Port Harcourt, Rivers State, Nigeria are strongly of the opinion that accessibility is an observed phenomenon in their organizations and hence are largely on the agreement range of the scale.

Table 4: Descriptive Statistics for Delivery Speed

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Dev.
To what extent does your company service delivery speed contribute to its level of competitiveness?	135	1.00	5.00	3.8519	1.20024
To what extent does your company reduce lead time due to its efficient product speed of delivery?	135	1.00	5.00	3.5778	1.00348
To what extent are your delivery options an important component of order fulfilment that helps to develop trust, which significantly affects consumer purchase intentions?	135	1.00	5.00	3.8519	1.20024
Valid N (listwise)	135				

Source: SPSS Output

Table 4 illustrates that there is a high level of affirmation (where $x > 2.50$) as regards the indicators of delivery speed which is a measure of competitiveness. The construct examined the context and manifestations of delivery speed within the target organizations with indicators aimed at

examining respondents' perception of accessibility. The results affirm to all three indicators of delivery speed within the target organizations as also supported by the low disparity in response ($SD < 2.00$). The implication of these responses is that the respondents of oil and gas firms in Port Harcourt, Rivers State, Nigeria are strongly of the opinion that delivery speed is an observed phenomenon in their organizations and hence are largely on the agreement range of the scale.

Table 5: Correlations for customer sensitivity and product flexibility

		Customer Sensitivity	Product Flexibility
Customer Sensitivity	Pearson Correlation	1	.862**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	135	135
Product Flexibility	Pearson Correlation	.862**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	135	135

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

Source: SPSS output version 23.0

Table 5 shows the result of correlation between customer sensitivity and product flexibility. Similarly displayed in the table is the statistical test of significance (p - value), which makes possible the generalization of our findings to the study population. The correlation coefficient of 0.862 confirms there is a very strong correlation between the variables. From the result obtained, the sig- calculated is less than significant level ($p = 0.000 < 0.05$). Therefore, the null hypothesis earlier stated is hereby rejected. Thus, there is significant relationship between customer sensitivity and product flexibility of oil and gas firms in Rivers State.

Table 6: Correlations for customer sensitivity and accessibility

		Customer Sensitivity	Accessibility
Customer Sensitivity	Pearson Correlation	1	.832**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	135	135
Accessibility	Pearson Correlation	.832**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	135	135

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

Source: SPSS output version 23.0

Table 6 shows the result of correlation between customer sensitivity and accessibility. Similarly displayed in the table is the statistical test of significance (p - value), which makes possible the generalization of our findings to the study population. The correlation coefficient of 0.832 confirms there is a very strong correlation between the variables. From the result obtained, the sig- calculated is less than significant level ($p = 0.000 < 0.05$). Based on these results, the null hypothesis earlier stated is hereby rejected. Thus, there is significant relationship between customer sensitivity and accessibility of oil and gas firms in Rivers State.

Table 7: Correlations for customer sensitivity and delivery speed

		Customer Sensitivity	Delivery Speed
Customer Sensitivity	Pearson Correlation	1	.897**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	135	135
Delivery Speed	Pearson Correlation	.897**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	135	135

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

Source: SPSS output version 23.0

Table 7 shows the result of correlation between customer sensitivity and delivery speed. Similarly displayed in the table is the statistical test of significance (p - value), which makes possible the generalization of our findings to the study population. The correlation coefficient of 0.897 confirms there is a very strong correlation between the variables. From the result obtained, the sig-calculated is less than significant level ($p = 0.000 < 0.05$). Therefore, the null hypothesis earlier stated is hereby rejected. Thus, there is a significant relationship between customer sensitivity and delivery speed of oil and gas firms in Rivers State.

Discussion of Findings

This study opted to assess the correlation between market sensitivity and competitiveness of oil and gas firms in Rivers State. The results obtained from the data analyses conducted, showed that customer sensitivity has very strong positive and statistically significant relationship with competitiveness of the firms surveyed. These findings align with the view that firms that regularly update their knowledge of consumers' demand increase their performance (Udegbe, 2017).

The findings of the study also support the findings that customer sensitivity positively correlates with supply chain performance of manufacturing firms (Liu & Wang, 2009). In addition, the findings accentuate the reports of Ateke and Didia (2017) that market sensitivity predicts business wellness of deposit money banks; as well as that of Otchere (2013) and Hussain and Nassar (2010) customer sensitivity relates to job satisfactions. Similarly, the current findings corroborate the finding of Amangala and Ateke (2018) that customer orientation of service employees improve satisfaction of deposit money bank customers.

Relatedly, the findings align arguments in existing literature that emphasize the importance of customer-centric approaches in enhancing organizational competitiveness (Smith & Jones, 2019). Porter (1985) states that understanding and responding swiftly to consumer needs is fundamental to creating competitive advantage, as it enables the firm to differentiate its offerings and build stronger customer loyalty.

Moreover, the study's findings are consistent with the work of Ateke and Harcourt (2024) which emphasize the role of market-sensing capability in the innovativeness of hospitality firms; and that of Anderson and Narus (2004) who argue that customer sensitivity leads to improved customer satisfaction, which in turn fosters repeat business and positive word-of-mouth, both of which are critical to maintaining and enhancing market position.

The implication of the current findings and their consistency with arguments and reports in extant literature is that in highly competitive industries like Nigeria' oil and gas industry, firms that

exhibit high levels of customer sensitivity are more likely to attract and retain customers; and strengthen their competitive standing.

Additionally, the significant influence of customer sensitivity on competitiveness supports the notion that in industries with complex supply chains and high operational risks, such as oil and gas, customer sensitivity is a key differentiator (Kotler & Keller, 2016). By prioritizing customer needs and quickly adapting to changing demands, firms will not only satisfy existing customers but also position themselves as preferred partners in the industry.

Conclusion and Recommendation

In view of the findings made, and the extent of their consistency with existing knowledge, the study concludes that customer sensitivity enhances competitiveness of oil and gas firms in Rivers State. The study recommends that management of oil and gas companies should prioritize the development and implementation of robust customer relationship management (CRM) systems. These systems should be designed to capture, analyse, and respond to customer feedback and preferences in real-time.

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