

## **PRODUCT DIFFERENTIATION AND CUSTOMER RETENTION OF PRIVATE MEDIA ESTABLISHMENTS IN RIVERS STATE**

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### **Abstract**

This study investigated the association between product differentiation and customer retention of private media establishments in Rivers State. Product differentiation was the predictor variable. Customer retention was the criterion variable and was measured with brand trust, switching barrier and customer loyalty. The research tested 3 alternate hypotheses in order to establish the association between product differentiation and customer retention of private media establishments. The study adopted an explanatory research design. The Population of the study comprised fifty (50) private media establishments in Rivers State as enlisted in the Rivers State yellow pages. The study adopted a census. Two (2) respondents were drawn from each of the private media establishments in Rivers State, making a total of hundred (100) respondents. Categories of respondents were the marketing managers and sales managers of private media establishments in Rivers State. Pearson's Product Moment Correlation was used to test the hypotheses at the secondary level of analyses. The study found positive and statistically significant associations between product differentiation and customer retention. The study concludes that product differentiation significantly relate to customer retention of private media establishments in Rivers State; and recommends that managers of private media establishments should effectively differentiate their product in view of its strategic role in driving customer retention.

**Keywords:** Brand trust, customer loyalty, product differentiation, customer retention, switching barrier

### **Introduction**

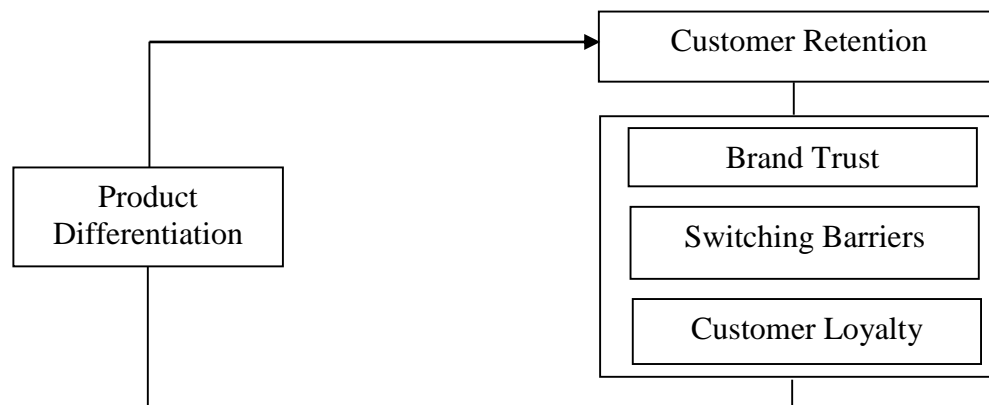
Media establishments are the means through which diverse audiences get abreast with happenings in the society (Azubuike & Ikiriko, 2019). They provide service in different media: radio, television, film, books, sound recordings, and others. The entrenchment of free market economy and the attendant increase in private investment as seen a surge in private media establishment; and this has result in intense competition for listenership. Consequently, private media houses have become more market-focused, and have increasingly sought strategies to achieve customer retention.

One of such strategies that private media houses can exploit is product differentiation. Product differentiation is a strategy employed in saturated markets and highly competitive industries, to distinguish a firm and its products from those of competitors by focusing on unique attributes, quality and value-added value (Jerab & Mabrouk, 2023; Rahman, 2011). Didia (2004) posits that firms have dual objectives of providing product to satisfy consumers' needs and to attain profits. The product is the means through which these objectives are achieved.

According to Nolega et al. (2015), product differentiation is a strategic tool for achieving long-term customer retention as it enables organisations to provide products that are tailored toward

the needs of customers. Rehman (2011) notes that product differentiation is essential to establishing competitive advantage because it enhances perceived value of offerings.

Existing literature on product differentiation is robust. Numerous scholarly efforts have focused on how product differentiation determine customer retention. Dirisu et al. (2013) examined the role of product differentiation in competitive advantage optimal organizational performance. Kedera et al. (2015) investigated effects of product differentiation strategies on product performance. However, these studies did not directly link product differentiation to customer retention. Hence the focus of this study is to determine the relationship between product differentiation and customer retention of private media establishments in Rivers State, using brand trust, switching barriers and customer loyalty as metrics of customer retention. The study is guided by the conceptual framework in fig. 1.



**Fig. 1:** Conceptual framework of product differentiation and customer retention of private media establishments in Rivers State.

## Literature Review

### Theoretical foundation

This study is anchored on Expectation confirmation theory (ECT). ECT is a cognitive theory that seeks to explain post-purchase or post-adoption satisfaction as a function of expectations, perceived performance, and disconfirmation of beliefs (Oliver, 1977, 1980). ECT explain how individuals' prior expectations about a phenomenon shape their perceptions and judgments of the phenomenon.

ECT draws on social comparison theory, which posits that people compare themselves to others to evaluate their abilities, attributes and performance. Hence, the fundamental idea of ECT is that people have specific expectations about a product, and their perceptions and attitudes towards the product are shaped by the extent to which their expectations are confirmed or disconfirmed.

Expectations are based on prior experiences, information and beliefs that guide people's perceptions, judgments and behavior. Studies show that when people's expectations are met or exceeded, they tend to have more positive attitudes, higher satisfaction, and stronger intentions to use or repurchase the product. Conversely, when their expectations are not met, they tend to have negative attitudes, lower satisfaction and weaker intentions to use or repurchase the product.

### **Concept of product differentiation**

According to Udodiugwu et al. (2022), product differentiation is a marketing tactic that companies employ to set their products apart from competing ones. Making a product stand out from the competition is all about giving it a unique look or quality. A diverse selection of items with unique characteristics can be found in the market within the majority of manufacturing zones.

The goal of differentiating products is to increase customer happiness and loyalty, which in turn boosts business success (Olawale & Margret, 2021). According to Kedera et al. (2015), this becomes immediately apparent as soon as one enters a store. Adninan and Abukari (2013) state that in order to protect themselves from disastrous pricing wars, businesses differentiate their products. According to Dirisu and Ibidunni (2013), there are many ways to make a brand stand out, but finding significant product-driven differentiators is where real profits reside.

### **Customer retention**

An organization's efforts to keep customers from defecting is known as customer retention (Hamilton-Ibama & Ihunwo, 2022). Customer retention is a key objective of firms because the cost of acquiring new customers is far greater than the cost of maintaining existing ones (Roking, 2005, cited in Kuria & Muturi, 2018). Hamilton-Ibama and Ihunwo (2022) opine that customer retention is an activity undertaken by an organization to reduce customer defection. According to Keiningham et al. (2007), customer retention represents customers' stated continuation of a business relationship with a firm.

Prioritizing customer value over profit maximisation and shareholder value is key to customer loyalty, which in turn increases customer retention. The goal of marketing is to keep customers loyal (Tamuliene & Gabryte, 2014). According to Morterstert and Ransburg (2009), customer retention is defined as "the way in which organisations focus their efforts on existing customers in an effort to continue doing business with them.

Customer retention strategies aim to create value for consumers by encouraging them to remain loyal with the firm over time (Asagba et al., 2019). There are different metrics for measuring customer retention, including brand trust, switching barriers, and customer loyalty (Hamilton-Ibama & Ihunwo, 2022). These indices are adopted in this study.

### **Brand trust**

Any combination of the following - name, phrase, sign, symbol - that aims to reflect the distinctiveness and benefits that a firm may deliver to consumers through a particular product or set of attributes - and which serves to improve consumer loyalty - is considered a brand (Jacoby, 2015; Didia, 2009). Any effective marketing plan must prioritize building trust, which aids in drawing in, interacting with, and keeping loyal consumers who appreciate a business and its offerings.

The question then becomes how to track and enhance marketing credibility score. According to Andervazh et al. (2013), brand trust is the level of emotional commitment that customers have towards a brand. Having consumers have a positive impression of a company's brand is crucial since it cements their loyalty to that brand. According to Kim et al. (2021), one of the most significant functions of a brand is to help customers recognise and distinguish a company's offerings from those of rivals.

### ***Switching barrier***

According to Deng et al. (2010, as cited in Rachmawati & Mohaidin, 2019), switching barrier is any combination of circumstances that makes moving to a different service provider more difficult or costly for consumers. According to Kim et al. (2004), customers face psychological and financial burden when they switch between service providers. Even though customers are forced to remain with their present brand or supplier, switching barriers still play a role in keeping them there (Kotler, & Keller, 2016; Dhewi et al., 2020). Switching barriers are concerns customers have to deal with or give up in order to make a change (Jones et al., 2000).

### ***Customer loyalty***

According to Ahmed and Moosavi (2013), customer loyalty is the tendency of a consumer to stay with a product even when competitors offer products that are comparable to or even better than the current product. Most of the time, individuals, businesses, and products are the objects of loyalty because of the mutually beneficial nature of the relationship (Udodiugwu et al., 2022).

Counting the number of times a business sells to the same client is one way to gauge customer loyalty. The health of a company depends on the loyalty of its customers (Hamilton-Ibama & Ihunwo, 2022). According to Alrubaiee and Al-Nazer (2010), committed customers are willing to put up with less-than-ideal treatment in the hopes of a more favourable future with a company. When consumers remain committed to a single brand even when rivals launch innovative new products, this phenomenon is known as customer loyalty.

### **Product Differentiation and Customer Retention**

Kedera et al. (2015) investigated effects of product differentiation on product performance. The specific objective of the study was to determine the effects of product differentiation on firm's strategic approach to management. The findings was that product differentiation is key to a firm's performance and competitive advantage, hence strategic approach to management.

Dhewi et al. (2020) investigated the moderating role of switching barriers on the relationship between consumer trust and loyalty was investigated. The findings demonstrated that switching barriers mediated the relationship between customer trust and loyalty. Tamuliene and Gabryte (2014) on their part, investigated elements impacting customer retention. The study identified product quality and brand identity as some of the factors that impact customer retention.

Ahmed et al. (2015) analysed the mobile phone market in Manchester, UK, to determine what variables influence customer switching behaviour. The study identified price, product quality, brand image and loyalty programmes as some of the inducers switching and non-switching intentions.

In this study, we assume that changing demographics, brand image, perception, behaviours, attitudes, loyalty, advertising, and other factors strongly influence customer retention. Thus, we hypothesize that:

**H<sub>A1</sub>:** Product differentiation significantly associate with brand trust of private media establishments in Rivers State.

**H<sub>A2</sub>:** Product differentiation significantly associate with switching barrier of private media establishments in Rivers State.

**H<sub>A3</sub>:** Product differentiation significantly associate with customer loyalty of private media establishments in Rivers State

## Methodology

This study adopted an explanatory research strategy. Fifty (50) privately owned media outlets in Rivers State, as mentioned in the Rivers State yellow pages (2014), made up the population of the study. The study adopted the census method. Hence, all the fifty (50) private media establishments was studied. However, two (2) respondents were drawn from each of the private media establishments in Rivers State, making a total of hundred (100) respondents. The respondents were marketing managers and sales managers. A pilot study was conducted to determine the reliability of the research instrument in which data from respondents were subjected to Cronbach's Alpha reliability test with a threshold of 0.70 established by Nunally in 1979 which indicated that the items were reliable as shown in on table 1. Descriptive statistical tool such as frequencies, bar chart, mean, standard deviation and range were used to present data at the primary level of analysis. The inferential statistics Pearson's Product Moment Correlation (PPMC) was used to test the hypotheses at the secondary level of analyses. All the statistical analyses was performed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 23.0.

**Table 1: Reliability Test - Cronbach's Alpha Analysis**

S/N	Variables	Number of Items	Cronbach's Alpha Coefficients
1	Product Differentiation	4	0.789
2	Brand Trust	4	0.853
3	Switching Barrier	4	0.842
4	Customer Loyalty	4	0.706

Source: SPSS Output from field data (2024)

## Data Analysis and Results

**Table 2: Descriptive Statistic of Product Differentiation**

	N	Sum	Mean	Std. Deviation	Variance
What is the extent of your product differentiation?	91	387	4.25	1.252	1.569
To what extent is your firm offering perceived by the buyer as different from the competition?	91	399	4.38	1.062	1.128
To what extent does your firm gain competitive advantages by increasing the perceived value?	91	409	4.49	1.149	1.319
To what extent does your distinguish your services from similar offerings in the market?	91	419	4.60	.828	.686
Valid N (listwise)	91				

Source: SPSS Output, 2024.

Table 2 revealed that, most of responses to product differentiation are on the higher side of the Likert scale which ranges from 1 to 5. As a result of the high concentration of the responses on the higher side of the scale, the mean scores are greater than 3.00. However, it can be seen that question 4 which sought to determine the extent private media establishments in Rivers state distinguish their services from similar offerings in the market, has the highest sum of 419 and therefore the highest mean score of 4.60. This also indicates that this item has the strongest influence on the variable. Also, question 4 has the highest standard deviation of 0.828 and variance of 0.686, indicates that responses spread most in item 4 compared to other questions.

**Table 3: Descriptive Statistic of Brand Trust**

	N	Sum	Mean	Std. Deviation	Variance
What extent is your brand trust?	91	403	4.43	.858	.737
To what extent is your customers feel that they can trust a business?	91	435	4.78	.727	.529
To what extent is your firm helps to establish a strong customer association?	91	425	4.67	.700	.490
To what extent does your firm brand create added value to customers?	91	451	4.96	.206	.042
Valid N (listwise)	91				

Source: SPSS Output, 2024.

Table 3 revealed that, most of the responses with respect to customer retention are on the higher side of the Likert scale which ranges from 1 to 5. As a result of the high concentration of the responses on the higher side of the scale, the mean scores are greater than 3.00. However, it can be seen that question 4 which sought to determine the extent to which private media establishments in Rivers State create added value to their customers, has the highest sum of 451 and therefore the highest mean score of 4.96. This also indicates that this item has the strongest influence on the variable. Also, question 4 has the highest standard deviation of 0.206 and variance of 0.042, indicating that responses spread most in item 4 compared to others.

**Table 4: Descriptive Statistic of Switching Barrier**

	N	Sum	Mean	Std. Deviation	Variance
What extent is your switching barrier?	91	393	4.32	1.094	1.197
To what extent is your firm measure for customers to switch to other service providers?	91	423	4.65	.874	.764
To what extent is your firm put measures for customers not to change providers?	91	405	4.45	1.148	1.317
To what extent is the firm propensity of a customer been prevented by legal means of moving to competitors?	91	371	4.08	1.327	1.761
Valid N (listwise)	91				

Source: SPSS Output, 2024.

Table 4 revealed that, most of the responses with respect to customer retention are on the higher side of the Likert scale which ranges from 1 to 5. As a result of the high concentration of the responses on the higher side of the scale, the mean scores are greater than 3.00. However, it can be seen that question 2 which sought to determine the extent to which private media establishments in Rivers state put measure for customers not to change providers, has the highest sum of 423 and therefore the highest mean score of 4.65. This also indicates that this item has the strongest influence on the variable. Also, question 2 has the highest standard deviation of 0.874 and variance of 0.764, indicating that, responses spread most in question 2 compared to other questions.

**Table 5: Descriptive Statistic of Customer Loyalty**

	N	Sum	Mean	Std. Deviation	Variance
What extent is your customer loyalty?	91	423	4.65	.848	.719
To what extent is your firm resolves to continue with a particular customer despite the introduction of new products by the competitors?	91	447	4.91	.285	.081
To what extent is your firm measuring the actual repeated sales to the same customers?	91	441	4.85	.363	.132
To what extent is your firm customer's inclination to remain with a product?	91	431	4.74	.854	.730
Valid N (listwise)	91				

Source: SPSS Output, 2024.

Table 5 revealed that, most of the responses with respect to customer retention are on the higher side of the Likert scale which ranges from 1 to 5. As a result of the high concentration of the responses on the higher side of the scale, the mean scores are greater than 3.00. However, it can be seen that question 2 which sought to determine the extent to which private media establishments in Rivers state put measure for customers not to change providers, has the highest sum of 447 and therefore the highest mean score of 4.91. This also indicates that this item has the strongest influence on the variable. Also, question 2 has the highest standard deviation of 0.285 and variance of 0.81, indicating that, responses spread most in question 2 compared to other questions.

**Table 6: Association between Product Differentiation and Brand trust**

		Product Differentiation	Brand Trust
Product Differentiation	Pearson Correlation	1	.498**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	91	91
Brand Trust	Pearson Correlation	.498**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	91	91

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

Source: SPSS Output, 2024.

Table 6 shows a correlation coefficient of 0.498\*\* between product differentiation and brand trust, indicating a moderate significant association between product differentiation and brand trust. More so, the probability value (0.000) is less than the critical value (0.05), this shows that there is a significant association between product differentiation and brand trust. This further implies that most of the changes in brand trust among private media establishments in Rivers State are caused by product differentiation while others are caused by externalities. Based on this, we accept the alternate hypothesis that there is a significant association between product differentiation and brand trust of private media establishments in Rivers State.

**Table 7: Association between Product Differentiation and Switching Barrier**

		Product differentiation	Switching Barrier
Product Differentiation	Pearson Correlation	1	.849**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	91	91
Switching Barrier	Pearson Correlation	.849**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	91	91

Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).  
 Source: SPSS Output, 2024.

Table 7 displays a correlation coefficient of 0.849\*\* between product differentiation and switching barrier. This indicates a very strong association between product differentiation and switching barrier. More so, the probability value (0.000) is less than the critical value (0.05), this shows that there is a significant association between product differentiation and switching barrier. This implies that change in switching barrier among private media establishment in Rivers State is caused by product differentiation. Based on this, we accept the alternate hypothesis that there is a significant association between product differentiation and switching barrier of private media establishment in Rivers State.

**Table 8: Association between Product Differentiation and Customer Loyalty**

		Product differentiation	Customer loyalty
Product Differentiation	Pearson Correlation	1	.581**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	91	91
Customer Loyalty	Pearson Correlation	.581**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	91	91

Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).  
 Source: SPSS Output, 2024.

Table 8 shows is a correlation coefficient of 0.581\*\* between product differentiation and customer loyalty, indicating a moderate association between product differentiation and customer loyalty. More so, the probability value (0.000) is less than the critical value (0.05), this shows that the association between product differentiation and customer loyalty is significant. Based on this, we accept the alternate hypothesis that there is a significant association between product differentiation and customer loyalty of private media establishment in Rivers State.

### Discussion of Findings

The analysis of the study revealed a correlation coefficient of 0.498\*\* between product differentiation and brand trust, indicating a moderate significant association between product differentiation and brand trust. More so, the probability value (0.000) is less than the critical value (0.05), this shows that the association between the variables is significant.

The analysis also revealed a correlation coefficient of 0.849\*\* between product differentiation and switching barrier, indicating a very strong association between product differentiation and switching barrier. More so, the probability value (0.000) is less than the critical value (0.05), this shows that there is a significant association between product differentiation and switching barrier.



Further, the analysis revealed a correlation coefficient of 0.581<sup>\*\*</sup> between product differentiation and customer loyalty, indicating a moderate association between product differentiation and customer loyalty. More so, the probability value (0.000) is less than the critical value (0.05), this shows that there is a moderate significant association between product differentiation and customer loyalty.

The study findings aligns with the study findings of other scholars. Specifically, the study aligns with the findings of Kedera et al. (2015) which investigated the effects of product differentiation strategies on firm product performance; and found that product differentiation strategies have effects on firms' product performance.

Dhewi et al. (2020) examined the association between switching barriers, customer trust and customer loyalty in cellular operator brands. The respondents of this study were students from several different university in East Java, Indonesia. The result showed that switching barriers were able to mediate the influence of customer trust to customer loyalty.

Furthermore, the study agrees with the study findings of Tamuliene and Gabryte (2014) which examined the factors influencing customer retention: case study of Lithuanian mobile operators. The empirical research results showed that there is a statistically significant positive correlation between variables.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

This study concludes that product differentiation significantly relate with customer retention of private media establishments in Rivers State. This conclusion is predicated on the findings of this study and to the extent of its consistency with results of similar previous studies.

Based on the findings of the study and to the extent of its consistency with the result of similar studies, we make the following recommendations:

1. Managers of private media establishments should effectively differentiate their product knowing its strategic role in achieving effectiveness and efficiency in operations.
2. The management of private media establishment in Rivers State should enthusiastically work towards maintaining product differentiation to improve their customer retention.

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