

BRAND ASSOCIATION AND MARKETING WELLNESS OF TRAVEL AND TOURISM COMPANIES IN RIVERS STATE, NIGERIA

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Abstract

This study examined the relationship between brand association and marketing wellness of travel and tour companies in Rivers State. Brand association was used as the predictor variable to marketing wellness with respect to market share and sales growth. The study adopted an explanatory research design. The population of the study consisted 16 registered travel and tour companies. The entire population was adopted as the sample size. 3 management level staff (marketing manager, operational manager and tour manager) from each of the 16 firms served as respondents, making 48 respondents for the study, out of which only 39 responses were used for the study. Data for the study were collected via a self-made structured questionnaire. Pearson Product Moment Correlation statistics was used to tests the hypotheses formulated for the study, and was aided by the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS), version 25.0. The study found different degree of positive relationship between brand association and measures of marketing wellness (market share and sales growth). Thus, the study concludes that brand association significantly relates to marketing wellness; and recommends that managers of travel and tour companies in Rivers State that seek enhanced marketing wellness should develop and nurture brand association as an intangible asset.

Keywords: brand association, market share, marketing wellness, travel and tour companies, sales growth

Introduction

Marketers are constantly working to comprehend customer preferences as consumers are naturally unpredictable (Ateke & Nadube, 2017). The intense competition in business environment has underscored the importance for companies to focus on customer centric strategies. Consequently, understanding current and potential value demands of consumers has become a crucial factor in developing effective marketing plans (Ateke et al., 2016). The core of business is marketing and any institution where marketing is absent should not be seen as an organization (Drucker 1954).

Ateke and Didia, (2017) posit that a company that fails to create satisfied customers by identifying and meeting their needs is not truly in business; it is merely passing through the business landscape. Identifying and meeting present and potential needs of customers is essential for survival and sustainability, therefore firms seek better ways to correctly determine the changing needs of customers. Being sensitive to customers' needs and adapting the organisation to delivering the sensed needs has thus become a strategic option for firms that crave improved marketing wellness.

Marketing wellness is itself a frontline objective firm in today's markets, and is pursued through different marketing actions, including brand association (Pike & Page, 2020). Though travel and tourism comprises face challenges relating to intense competition, seasonality of demand, rising consumer expectations and demand for personalization, sustainability and ethical concerns (Ibrahim & Sonmez, 2020; Cohen & Ben-Nun, 2021), those whose brands are linked to positive experiences are thought to do better than others. This means that brand association as an element of brand equity if instrumental to solving most challenges faced my firms today.

Brand association is a marketing activity that creates pathway for consumers to increase the value of an organization (Acquia, 2021). Such association confer several benefits sought by firms including marketing wellness, in terms of market share and sales growth. However, there is not

sufficient empirical studies that links brand association to marketing wellness of firms in Rivers State. Thus, this study sought to close the knowledge gap by assessing the relationship between brand association and marketing wellness of travel and tour companies in Rivers state.

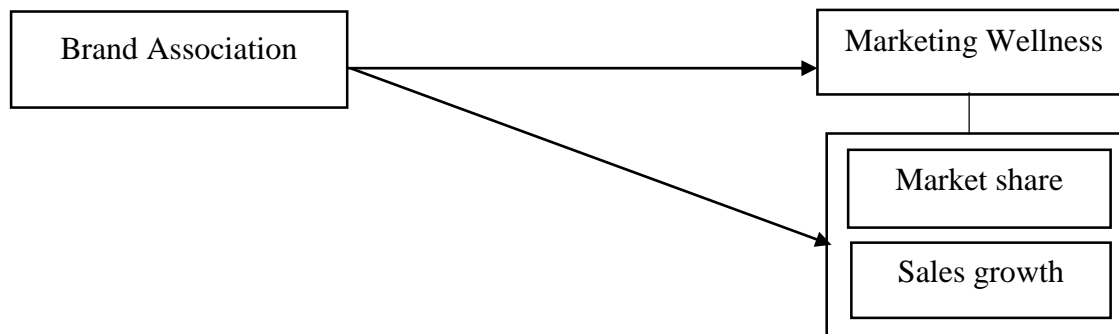


Fig 1: Conceptual relationship between brand association and marketing wellness of travel and tour companies in Rivers State.

Theoretical Foundation

This study is underpinned by self-congruity. Sirgy (1982) argues for a match between a consumer's self-concept and the brand image they prefer (Sirgy, 1982). Self-congruity theory is a psychological which argues that consumers compare their perception of a brand personality to their own actual, ideal social and self-concept (Sirgy, 2018). Sirgy (1982) argued that consumers prefer brands whose image aligns with their actual self or ideal self. This position suggests that consumers' loyalty, trust and emotional connection to brands is predicated on the alignment between the brand and their self-concept (Malar et al., 2011).

Aaker's (1997) argues that self-congruity theory has implication for purchase intention and brand loyalty. This is based on the belief that consumers are more likely to purchase and remain loyal to brands that aligns with their self-concept. This is specifically evident in lifestyle, where brand association and identity becomes part of consumer's daily life and self-expression.

In collectivist cultures, for examples, social congruity (how the brand fits with group expectations) may matter more than self-congruity. Self-congruity theory is highly relevant in understanding the relationship between brand association and marketing wellness, as it explains why consumers are likely to trust and remain loyal to brands that resonate with their self-image and personal values. Again, the relevance of self-congruity theory is that it explains why and how consumers connect emotionally with activities that allow brand to reflect their self-identity and aspiration; and because it considers cultural and social factors that contribute marketing wellness.

Brand Association

Brand associations is pivotal to shaping consumer preferences and perceptions and purchase decisions. In the contemporary business landscape, where consumers are inundated with an array of choices, brand association has emerged as a key differentiator for companies striving to stand out in the market. Acquia (2021) defined brand association as the mental connection that a consumer or makes with a brand. It refers to mental connections that consumers make between a brand and certain attributes, values, or emotions.

Brand association is often leveraged as platform for brand relationship development which guides brand maintainers on how to use sources of brand equity to develop brand relationships (Wang, 2015). Kandampully and Khandekar (2023) asserts that understanding brand associations allow marketers to tailor their strategies to resonate with target audiences, leveraging relevant brand attributes and values in brand messaging. Also, brand association enable brands to differentiate

themselves from competitors by creating distinctive and memorable associations that set them apart in the minds of consumers.

Gordon et al. (2016) classified brand association into functional brand association, symbolic brand association and experiential brand association. Functional brand associations are based on tangible product attributes and benefits that a brand offers. Consumers develop functional associations by evaluating the performance, quality, reliability, and utility of a brand's products.

Symbolic brand associations are characterized by meanings and values associated with a brand. According to Escalas and Bettman (2015), symbolic brand associations are characterized by social, cultural, and emotional meanings attributed to a brand. Consumers develop symbolic associations based on a brand's image, personality, values, and associations with particular lifestyles or social groups (Mackintosh & Didia, 2020). This implies that symbolic brand associations go beyond product attributes, and appeals to consumers' self-expression, identity and social status.

Experiential brand associations create a holistic brand experience that resonates emotionally and cognitively with consumers, fostering strong brand engagement and loyalty. Consumers develop experiential associations through direct interactions with the brand, such as in-store experiences, customer service encounters, or brand events.

Mohammad et al. (2017) elucidate that brand association helps in shaping overall brand image of an organization by creating unique, memorable connections in consumers' minds. Barani and Menon (2016) opine that through brand associations, companies position themselves as innovative, trustworthy, or socially responsible. Strong brand associations lead to higher levels of customer loyalty and advocacy.

When consumers form positive associations with a brand, they are more likely to exhibit repeat purchase behavior and recommend the brand to others, thereby contributing to long-term business success. Brands that effectively leverage brand association gain a competitive edge in the market (Supiyandi et al., 2022). This is done by differentiating themselves from competitors through distinct brand associations.

Marketing Wellness

Ateke and Kalu (2016) asserts that marketing wellness is the outcome of a firm's marketing programmes and activities measured against stated marketing objectives or compared to the health of competing firms. Beauchemin et al. (2019) describe marketing wellness as a holistic approach to gauging marketing performance. Ateke and Akani (2018) argue that marketing wellness ensues from customized approaches to cater to individual needs and preferences, stating that brands leverage data and insights to tailor products to meet specific interests of their target audience.

Marketing wellness as an abstract concept that is measured using direct and indirect indicators (Parkinson & Davey, 2023; Mewborn, 2023). Strategic marketing literature reveals that marketing wellness have been viewed from operational (product quality and marketing effectiveness), market (sales growth, and market share) and financial (stock price, dividend payout and earning per share) perspectives (Nwokah & Maclayton, 2006; Venktrakaman & Ramanugan, 1986).

Ateke and Didia (2017) measured marketing wellness from profit oriented viewpoint using new product success, sales growth and profitability. Ateke and Kalu (2016) measured marketing wellness using sales growth, market share and profitability. Ateke and Akani (2018)

conceptualized marketing wellness with brand awareness, sales growth and market share. This study however, adopted market share and sales growth to measure marketing wellness.

Market share

Market share is one of the telling indicators of a company's performance in a competitive landscape as it describes how much of a market's total sales or revenue a given firm controls. Market share as a reflection of the marketing function, highlights how effectively marketing contributes to brand visibility, customer engagement, value delivery and competitive positioning (Bhattacharya et al., 2021). According to Edeling and Himme (2018), market share serve as a mirror of the marketing functions health- reflecting how effectively marketing drives customer acquisition, brand value and competitive positioning.

Odunayo (2018) discussed market share as a critical indicator of a company's marketing effectiveness. An increasing market share often signifies that a company's marketing strategies are resonating with consumers, leading to enhanced sales and a stronger competitive position. Integrating sustainability into marketing efforts further bolster market share by aligning with growing consumer demand for environmentally and socially responsible products.

Market share is gained through satisfied and retained customers, offer several advantages for businesses (Long, 2025; Ilodigwe, 2023). Didia and Nwokah (2015) asserts that market share reflects competitive strength by indicating how well a company is performing relative to its rivals and often leads to economies of scale. A larger market shares increases bargaining power with suppliers and distributors, while boosting brand recognition and customer loyalty. Ogonu and Hamilton-Ibama (2019) asserts that market share enhance investors' confidence by signaling business growth and stability, creates barriers to entry for potential competitors and provides valuable strategic insights for performance evaluation and future planning.

Sales growth

Mappanyuki and Sari (2017) defined sales growth as an increase in sales recorded in a given time-frame. Thomas et al. (2015) defined sales growth as a constraint which is used to measure the performance of sales team to increase the revenue over a pre-determined period of time. This definition focuses on the human and operational dimensions of sales growth, attributing success to performance of sales teams and highlighting the role of personnel effectiveness in driving growth.

Adebayo et al (2017) viewed sales growth as a yardstick for measuring corporate performance and productivity. This implies that sales growth is not only concerned with financial figure but includes broader elements of organizational efficiency and success. Businesses with rapidly growing sales do not really need large funds to finance their business operations (Aprilia & Kusumawati, 2020). Sales growth has been revealed to have a positive effect on profitability, where companies can increase profits with higher sales (Fransisca & Widjaja, 2019).

An increase in sales often reveals a positive market reception of a company's products (Mahmutaj & Krasniqi, 2020). According to Goa and Hafsi (2015), sales growth is influenced by strategic orientation of a company, including market, entrepreneurial, learning orientation which can drive superior marketing wellness. Sales growth is a key parameter of business wellness that firms must monitor, in order to have a fair grasp of trends because it is an essential component of forecasting and is instrumental to informed decision-making (Ateke & Kalu, 2016).

Brand Association and Marketing Wellness

Setyadi et al. (2025) examined how brand association, brand image and brand awareness influences perceive quality and sustainable consumption. The findings of the study revealed that

brand awareness, brand association and brand image have strong influence on perceived quality and sustainable consumption choice. Relatedly, Anitah (2024) studied the effect of brand association on marketing performance of Uganda Breweries Limited. The results indicated that the overall variance in marketing performance explained by brand associations was 14%, implying that the customer associations to UBL brands influence marketing performance. This implied that higher levels of brand associations lead to higher levels of marketing performance.

Raj and Saldanha (2024) evaluated factors driving mindfulness in consumer choices in brand preference within the wellness industry in Bangalore. The results showed that perceived trust, perceived sustainability advertising and perceived health claims are factors that influences the consciousness of a consumer in the wellness sector. It was also revealed demographic and socio-economic factors moderates the relationship between consumer mindfulness choices and brand preferences.

In addition, Supiyandi et al. (2022) studied the influence of brand awareness, brand association, perceived quality and brand loyalty of consumers in Indonesia. The findings showed a positive significant influence on online purchasing decisions. It was also revealed that brand association has no effect on purchasing decision while brand awareness, perceived quality and brand loyalty have an influence on consumer purchasing decisions.

In other studies, Rahman et al. (2022) investigated the relationship between destination brand equity and tourists revisit intention; and found that destination brand equity influences the revisit intention of traveler health tourism via destination brand association. Ateke and Akani (2018) examined the relationship between brand positioning and marketing wellness of deposit money banks in Rivers State; that a positive and statistically significant relationship exists between brand positioning and metric of marketing wellness with emphasis on brand awareness showing the highest relationship with brand positioning.

Furthermore, Vazifehdooost and Negahdari (2018) investigated the relationship between brand awareness, brand association and perceived quality with brand loyalty and repurchase intention of fashion brands in Iran; and found that brand equity dimensions have positive considerable impact on brand loyalty. Ateke and Nwulu (2017) examined the association between brand value and marketing wellness of deposit money banks in Rivers State; and a positive and statistically significant correlation between brand value and marketing wellness (market share, new product success and sales growth).

Methodology

This study adopted an explanatory research design, with a correlational method of investigation. The population of the study comprised 16 registered travel and tour companies as registered by Nigeria directory 2025. The entire population was adopted as the sample size. 3 management level staff (marketing manager, operational manager and tour manager) of the 16 firms served as respondents. Thus, 48 respondents provided data for the study. Data for the study were collected via self-made 5-point Likert scale structured instrument. Copies of questionnaire retrieved from respondents were analysed using Pearson Product Moment Correlation (PPMC) aided by the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS), version 25.0.

Test of Hypotheses

Table 1: Correlation between Brand Association and Market Share

		Brand Association	Market Share
Brand Association	Pearson Correlation	1	.392**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	39	39
Market Share	Pearson Correlation	.392**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	39	39

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

Source: SPSS output, 2025

Table 2: Correlation between Brand Association and Sales Growth

		Brand Association	Sales Growth
Brand Association	Pearson Correlation	1	.684**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	39	39
Sales Growth	Pearson Correlation	.684**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	39	39

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

Source: SPSS output, 2025

Interpretation of Results

A Pearson Correlation Analysis was run to assess the relationship between brand association and the measures of marketing wellness (market Share and sales growth) of travel and tour companies in Rivers State. Using a sample of 39 respondents, drawn from 16 travel and tourism companies in Rivers State, the analysis revealed - as shown in Table 1 and 2- that, brand association has different degree of positive and significant relationship with market share and sales growth of travel and tour companies in Rivers State with a correlation coefficient of 0.392 and 0.684 respectively with probability value of $0.000 < 0.05$. In view of this result, the researcher rejects the hypothesized relationship between brand association and measures of marketing well (market Share and ales growth), wherein it states that “there is no significant relationship between brand association and measures of marketing wellness (market share and sales growth) of travel and tour companies in Rivers State.” Based on this result, it is asserted that brand association has a weak, positive and significant relationship with market share; and a strong, positive and significant relationship with sales growth of travel and tour companies in Rivers State.

Discussion of Findings

The findings are in agreement that brand association is essential to achieving marketing wellness as it influences how consumers perceive and trust brands. Setyadi et al. (2025) demonstrate how brand association strongly influences perceived quality and sustainable consumption choice.

The findings also compares to those of Anitah (2024) brand association explain variance in marketing performance. This implied that higher levels of brand associations lead to higher levels of marketing performance. Similarly, our findings support the report that perceived trust, perceived sustainability advertising and perceived health claims influence consumers’ purchase of healthcare (Raj & Saldanha, 2024).

In addition, our findings aligns with the reports that destination brand equity influences the revisit intention of traveler’s health tourism via destination brand association (Rahman et al., 2022); that

a positive and statistically significant relationship exists between brand positioning and marketing wellness (Ateke & Akani, 2018); that brand equity a positive impact on brand loyalty (Vazifehdoost & Negahdari, 2018); and a positive and statistically significant correlation exists between brand value and marketing wellness (Ateke & Nwulu, 2017).

Conclusion and Recommendations

The study brought into vantage point, the empirical relationship between brand association and marketing wellness of travel and tour companies in Rivers state. Scholarly opinions were adequately provided as basis for the study. Based on the findings, the study concludes that brand association relates to marketing wellness. In the light of the findings and conclusion, the study recommends that managers of travel and tour companies should associate themselves with desirable lifestyle such as mindfulness, fitness and clean living building and strengthening their brand association through strategic initiatives, consistent messaging and engaging brand experience that resonate with consumers.

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