



BRAND CREDIBILITY AND BRAND LOYALTY IN UPSCALE HOTELS IN PORT HARCOURT, RIVERS STATE, NIGERIA

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Article history:	Abstract:
<p>Received: 26th January 2021 Accepted: 11th February 2021 Published: 1st March 2021</p>	<p>The study investigated the direct effect of brand credibility on brand loyalty in upscale hotels in Port Harcourt, Rivers State, Nigeria. The survey research design generated data from 246 hotel guests sampled in ten upscale hotels in Port Harcourt. The study used a well structured questionnaire with 16 scale items, in addition to five demographic items. The statistical result from the inferential analysis from two hypothesised relationships with the aid of SPSS revealed that brand loyalty in terms of repeat patronage and word of mouth communication towards the upscale hotels is driven by brand credibility. Thus, the results showed that brand credibility had positive significant effect on repeat patronage and word of mouth communication respectively. Entrepreneurs/managers operating upscale hotels in the hospitality industry are expected to build capabilities in brand credibility through right selection process, training and development to enable employees deliver quality service to guests. Academic and professional implications are provided.</p>
<p>Keywords: Brand Trust. Expertise. Repeat patronage. Word of Mouth Communication</p>	

INTRODUCTION

Hospitality organisations are involved in intensive competition for the loyalty of guests to their respective brands. The competition gets fiercer in the face of commoditisation of services in hospitality organisations such as hotels (Riemann, Schilke & Thomass, 2009) where limited differential attributes exist. What savvy hotel organisations do is to turn to branding strategy as a way of enhancing customer intimacy with a focus on the building of higher brand loyalty.

The foregoing becomes more rewarding to the organisations concerned because of the intangibility of services for which branding helps in tangibilising service offerings. More so, brands play several other roles that influence consumer choice behaviour in the marketing of services due to consumer uncertainty concerning product/service attributes. As noted by Erdem, Swait and Louviere (2002, p.1), there is general understanding that the gap between suppliers and consumers in the marketplace makes the target market to be uncertain about products/service attributes because, "of the condition of imperfect or asymmetric information that characterises many product markets because firms are more informed about their own products than consumers".

Managers of service brands are therefore concerned on how to position their brands as credible as possible with a view to being distinctive in the competitive marketplace. Brand credibility is described by Afzal, Chandio and Ghumro (2013) as the phenomenon which measures the believability of the customer towards a particular brand in terms of trustworthiness. In this case brands serve as signals to the target market and seen as "a purveyor of advantages" because it communicates product source, and reduces search costs and transaction risks (O'Cass & Grace, 2003, p.452)

In extant literature, the effect of brand credibility on consumer behavioural intentions have been studied in various market contexts (Erdem, Swait & Valenzuela, 2006; Erdem & Swait, 1998; Afzal, et al, 2013; Leischnig, Geigenmuller & Enke 2012). To the best of our knowledge, no study seems to have addressed the influence of brand credibility in hotels in Port Harcourt. This current study attempts to fill this gap by examining the effect of brand credibility on brand loyalty in terms of repeat patronage and word of mouth communication, in the context of upscale hotels in Port Harcourt, Rivers State, Nigeria.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

Signalling Theory: Marketers are aware that there is an information gap between sellers and consumers in the marketplace. The gap seems longer in the case of services marketing owing to the unique characteristics of services. To get cues that could enhance their purchase decision making, consumers rely on signals from the seller. This explains why the signalling theory anchors this study. Herbig and Milewicz (1995) define market signals as those marketing activities that provide information beyond mere form and alert another firm to its intention, motives or commitment. A more robust definition of signal was offered by Rao, Qi and Ruckert (as cited in Aghdaie, Dolatabali & Aliabadi, 2012, p.96) as "an action that the seller can take to convey information credibly about unobservable product quality to the buyer". Signalling theory expresses itself through the information economics perspective on brand equity. Information economics explicitly considers the imperfect and asymmetrical informational structure of the market. The problem of information asymmetry occurs as a result of the information gap which exists between sellers and buyers in a transaction (Baek, Kim & Yu 2010; Aghdaie, et al, 2012).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Brand Credibility

Erdem and Swait (1998) introduced the concept of "brand Credibility" into marketing literature. Afzal, et al, (2013, p.1), describe brand credibility as the phenomenon which is used to measure the believability of the customer towards a particular brand. Erdem, et al, (2006, p.34), defined Brand Credibility (the credibility of a brand as a signal), as "the believability of the product position information content in a brand, which depends on the willingness and ability of firms to deliver what they promise". For consumers to believe a brand there are several factors to be considered. This explains why McCroskey & Young (1981) regard credibility as a multidimensional concept comprising the perceiver's assessment of the communicator's relevant knowledge, honesty and good intentions towards the perceiver. On their own contribution, Herbig and Milewicz (1995, p.7), argues that credibility is the "believability of an organization's intentions at a particular moment of time". It can therefore be inferred that the credibility of an organization will only occur on the condition that it does what it says it will do. Two notable dimensions of brand credibility are trustworthiness (brand trust) and expertise.

Brand trust is increasingly drawing attention from both scholars and practitioners in the industry (Kishore & Ronald, 2008). Developing brands that customers come to trust over time is a fundamental strategy to achieving brand success (Alhaddad, 2014). Brand trust has been conceptualized by many scholars. Moorman, Christine, Gerald, and Rohit (2010) defined the concept as consumers' willingness to rely on the brand's promise. Trust is very crucial where there is significant risk and uncertainty associated with purchasing the services. Chaudhuri and Holbrook (2001) defined brand trust as the strong belief held by customers regarding the ability of a brand to fulfil its promise.

More so, Keller (2001) is of the view that commitment and loyalty on the part of customers could result to trust. This is possible because the willingness to patronize a brand amidst risk must be such that the target market has confidence in, and the expectation is that the whole purchase process would cause a positive outcome. Hotel management can borrow from this ideology in building and maintaining a trusting brand in the form of friendly service by front-line staff, effective customer complaints handling systems, quality meals, and general entertainment. Presidential Hotel for instance has a long held trust of security by customers. According to McAllister (2000), the degree to which guests is confident that when they visit the hotel that service performance would be equal to or exceed perceived service expectation is termed perceived trust. Though trust is on its own a multi-dimensional concept; however, it is important for hotel management to identify their core competence in the area of service delivery and deploy resources on those areas so as to win customer's trust and confidence.

Brand Loyalty

The study of consumer behaviour is very important in determining the why and how consumers act in particular ways in the marketplace. One of the consumers' behavioural and attitudinal responses to brands in the marketplace is brand loyalty. Oliver (1999, p.34) defined brand loyalty as "a deeply held commitment to re-buy or re-patronise a preferred product/service consistently in the future, thereby causing repetitive same-brand or same-brand-set purchasing, despite situational influences and marketing efforts having the potential to cause switching behaviour". This comprehensive and enduring definition of brand loyalty identifies its two basic dimensions: behavioural loyalty and attitudinal loyalty.

The behavioural loyalty dimension describes the repeated purchases of the brand by the consumer. On the other hand, the attitudinal perspective describes the psychological commitment towards the brand in terms of the consumers' disposition (Anwar, Gulzar, Sohail & Akram, 2011). Oliver, (1999) postulates that consumers pass through four phases to become truly loyal to a particular brand: cognitive loyalty, affective loyalty, conative loyalty and behavioural (action loyalty) called attitude evolution stages.

The achievement of brand loyalty has several strategic benefits for organizations such as getting new customers, supporting brand extensions, gaining high market share, reducing marketing costs, reducing customer switching behaviour, create basis for premium pricing, enhances brand equity (Tong & Harley, 2009; Aaker, 1996, Keller, 1993, Oliver, 1993). For this current study, two measures of brand loyalty: repeat patronage and word of mouth communication were used.

Repeat Patronage: Repurchase Intention otherwise called repeat patronage is described as the customers' actual behaviour which results in the purchase of the same product or service repeatedly or on more than one occasion (Ibzan, Balarabe, & Jakada 2016). Huge empirical evidence exists to show that many scholars (Ekeke, Akpan, & Aderale, 2020; Odor & Ekeke, 2020; Dick and Basu 1994; Ebrahim, Ghoneim, Irani, & Fan, 2016; Mittal & Kamakura 2001; Ibzan, et al, 2016; Quick & Burton 2000; Wanke & Fiese 2004) have studied repurchase intention to either determine factors influencing it or its consequences in various market contexts. Repurchase intention is exhibited mostly by satisfied customers and it is regarded as a source of profitability for marketing organizations.

Word of Mouth Communication (WOMC): Word-of-mouth (WOM) could be described as an informal communication source among consumers (senders and receivers) concerning good or services (Murray, 1991). In several purchase situations, consumers search for credible information (Money, 2004) that will help them to make good purchase decisions in order to reduce perceived risk. Word of mouth communication has proven to be a credible source of information in this regard. It has influence on consumer risk taking, consumer attitudes, short-term and long-term product judgments, choice behaviour and purchase decisions. Kemp (2011) posited empirical evidence from decades of consumer research indicates that WOMC is very influential on consumers' brand attitudes, judgments, and purchase intentions. It is considered to be more influential than advertising because of its high interactive nature and source credibility.

EMPIRICAL REVIEW AND HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT

Brand Credibility and Brand Loyalty (Repeat Patronage and word of mouth communication)

In extant literature it is argued that healthy brands are those that have earned the trust of customers; and that customers in-turn become apostles and advocates for such brands by referring the brand to friends and families (Kemp & Bui, 2011). The authors further argued that healthy brands must first and foremost satisfy customers, and if this persists over time, customers would however learn about their experiences before any form of trust could be earned. Trusting a brand according to Money, (2004) implies that customers not only have confidence about its services, but are willing to stick with such brand in the midst of competitors' brands. This explains why and how brand credibility enhances brand loyalty of customers.

Malik and Ahmad (2014) investigated the relationship of brand credibility and consumer loyalty with the indirect effect of attitude towards brand as mediator. The study was conducted in the service sector by taking a prominent sector food sector. To represent food service sector Pizza Hut was chosen. Sample of study was college/sub campuses students and staff members from banking institutions in Pakistan. The results revealed that brand credibility and consumer loyalty are the most significant factors. The study concluded that attitude towards brand as mediator plays a significant role.

Ghorban (2012) investigated the effect of brand credibility on consumers' behavioural intentions (satisfaction, continuous commitment and loyalty commitment) in the service market in Iran. The descriptive study collected data from university students in the capital city of Iran who were telecommunication service customers of Iran cell. The result showed that brand credibility was significantly related to customer satisfaction, loyalty commitment and continuous commitment. The managerial implication as provided by the authors showed that organizations that are perceived by customers as being credible brands would tend to have satisfied and more committed customers who are loyal to the brand.

In a study conducted in the Indonesian telecommunication market, Setyairan and Kussudiyarsana (2015) investigated the effect of brand trust (brand credibility) on brand loyalty. The study which adopted a descriptive research design made use of convenience sampling as the sampling methodology with a well structured questionnaire to sample 150 respondents. Hierarchical regression was used to test the hypotheses. The result showed that brand trust, brand satisfaction had significant effect on brand loyalty. The authors postulated that marketers should enhance the quality of services they render to customers especially in high involvement products with a view to achieving customers' satisfaction with the brand.

In the telecommunication industry in Iran, Zayerkabe, Albabayi and Abdoli (2012) examined the effect of brand credibility, perceived quality and brand prestige on brand loyalty. The descriptive study derived its population from the people living in Marand city with the condition that they possess a cell-phone. Simple sampling method was adopted for the study with structured questionnaire as instrument for data collection. The result of the regression analysis showed that brand credibility had positive and significant effect on brand loyalty.

Azadi, Yosefi and Eydi (2015) investigated the effects of brand credibility on customer loyalty based on the application of Sweeney and Swait's model for sports brands in Iran. The descriptive study used the alumni of physical education students of universities based on purposeful sampling. The structured questionnaire which was used as instrument for data collection was an online version. Two brands: Adidas and Nike were used for the study. The statistical analysis showed that brand credibility had positive and significant effect on brand loyalty.

In the fast food industry in the city of DG Khan in Pakistan, Mulik and Ahmad, (2014) investigated the effect of brand credibility on consumer loyalty, using the indirect effect of attitude towards the brand as a mediator variable. The descriptive study used staff members of banking institutions and students as the sampling unit. The study used well structured questionnaire for data collection. The statistical results from regression analysis showed that brand credibility had positive effect on consumer loyalty in the food industry in Pakistan. Also, attitude towards the brand

which acted as the mediating variable played significant role in the relationship between brand credibility and consumer loyalty.

According to Shukla and Purani, (2012) it is very crucial for customers to experience trust with the brand, because it results to repeat purchase and retention. Customers are bound to continue exhibiting positive disposition to trusted brands in terms of spreading brand experience to others. This notion is applicable in the hotel industry where organizations that earn the trust of customers do not need to spend huge amount of resources in convincing loyal customers to keep on buying; rather resources should be channelled towards acquiring potential customers to start using the organizations’ services. This could be achieved through WOM communication (Money, 2004).

Building and maintaining trust with customers is one of the fundamental strategies for a brand’s services especially in the hotel industry (Gbenga, & Osotimehin, 2015). Trust represents a crucial relationship feature between a service organization and its customer (Ercis, 2012). Sallam and Sefnedi, (2017) carried out a study on brand trust and its impact on WOM and customer retention using online survey of 154 respondents. Results revealed that brand trust has a positive and significant influence on WOM and customer retention. However, brand trust in their study was measured using credibility and service expertise. Again, according to Ercis, (2012) trust is built over time with consistent quality and satisfying offering. Loyal customers engage in repurchase intentions and WOM referral for brands that have been trusted over time. Based on the foregoing, we hypothesise that.

H1. Brand credibility has positive significant effect on hotel guests’ repeat patronage.

H2. Brand credibility has positive significant effect on hotel guests’ word of mouth communication

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research design: This study adopted a descriptive survey research design due to the fact that data bothering on the perception and preferences of hotel guests were involved. The statistical tool for testing of hypotheses was the simple regression analysis.

Sample and data collection: The target population for the current study were current hotel guests of 10 selected upscale hotels in Port Harcourt. With a large and unknown population, Freund and William’s formula for determination of sample size from unknown population was utilized to determine the sample size with a resulting figure of 246. A convenience sampling method was used to generate primary data from the guests. Only the guests who were found lodging in the hotel facilities during the period of questionnaire administration were included in the survey. The frontline hotel personnel helped in the distribution and retrieval of the well-structured questionnaire. Out of the 246 questionnaires distributed, only 196 were retrieved and proved useable and therefore subjected to data analysis.

Demographic Profile of Respondents: The information on demographic profile of respondents. The table shows that 109 respondents (55.6%) were male while 87 respondents (44.4%) were female. This implies that male respondents were of the majority. The information on age brackets of the respondents in section 2 of Table 4.1 above shows that no respondent was less than 20 years, 7 respondents (3.6%) were within 20 – 29 years, 82 respondents (41.8%) were within 30 – 39 years while 107 respondents (54.6%) were greater than 40 years. This information shows that majority of the respondents were greater than 49years. Information on the respondents’ level of education. They were represented as follows: with no formal education (nil) (0%), FSLC (nil) (0%), SSCE/GCE(nil) (0%), while HND/B.SC (103) (52.55%), MA/MSC/MBA (82) (41.83%) and PhD (11) (5.62%). From the information it shows that respondents with MA/M.Sc/MBA are of the majority.

Information on marital status of respondents showed that 49 respondents (25%) were single while 147 (75%) respondents were married. From the information it shows that respondents who are married are of the majority. Records on the number of years the guests have patronized their preferred hotels. The representation are as follows; 1-5years (106)(54%) 6-10years (90)(46%). From the information it shows that respondents who have patronized the hotels between 1 – 5 years are of majority.

Measurement Instrument and Questionnaire design

Extant literature provided the sources of items used in the study as follows: brand credibility (Erdem & Swait,1998))) and repeat patronage and word of mouth (Nysveen, Pedersen, & Skard, (2013); Chaudhuri & Holbrook, (2001); Oliver(1997).All measurement items used in expressing the degree of agreement were measured on a five-point Likert-type scale anchored by: Strongly Disagree [SD](1). Disagree [D](2), Agree [A](3), Agree fairly strongly(4) and Strongly Agree [SA](5).

RESEARCH RESULTS

Reliability Analysis

Table 1 Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardized Items	N of Items
.993	.996	16

The 16-item research instrument was subjected to a reliability test using Cronbach Alpha. As shown in Table 1, the value of the Cronbach Alpha is .99 which suggest very good internal consistency. As suggested by Nunnally and Bernstein (1994) the threshold value is .7 which implies that the measuring instrument could be very helpful and applicable in measuring opinions of hotel guests concerning the effect of brand credibility on their repeat patronage to the hotels and to engage in positive word of mouth communication.

Discriminant Validity

Table 2 Correlation Matrix

	Brand credibility	Repeat Patronage	WOMC
Brand credibility	1.000	.962	.980
Repeat Patronage	.962	1.000	.976
WOMC	.980	.976	1.000

The correlation matrix shown in Table 3 is used to determine the discriminant validity of the study instrument. Fornell and Larker (1981) suggested that discriminate validity occurs if all the diagonal elements are higher than all the off-diagonal elements in their rows and columns and the result as shown in the Table confirms the discriminant validity of the instrument

Sampling Adequacy

Table 3 KMO and Bartlett's Test

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy.	.768
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	1214.499
Approx. Chi-Square	3
Df	.000
Sig.	

The Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) performed on the 16 exploratory items of brand credibility and measures of brand loyalty (repeat patronage and word of mouth communication) shows that Bartlett's test of sphericity is significant at $p < .000$ and KMO measure of sampling adequacy is .768. The value of KMO is greater than 0.5 which was suggested as a minimum level by Kasser (as cited in Wong & Musa 2010).

DATA ANALYSES

To ascertain the effect of brand credibility on two measures of brand loyalty (repeat patronage and word of mouth communication) the two hypothesized relationships were subjected to statistical analysis using simple regression analysis.

TEST OF HYPOTHESES

DECISION RULE

If $PV < 0.05$ = Hypothesis is supported
 If $PV > 0.05$ = Hypothesis is not supported

Hypothesis one

H1. Brand credibility has positive significant effect on hotel guests' repeat patronage.

Table 4 describes the summary of the simple regression analysis showing the effect of brand credibility and repeat patronage upscale hotels in Port Harcourt.

Table 4. The simple regression analysis for the influence of brand credibility on repeat patronage

Dependent variable	Independent Variable	Beta(β)	t-value	p-value
Repeat Patronage	Brand Credibility	.962	49.343	0.00**

Notes: $P \leq 0.05$; $R = .962$; $R^2 = .926$; Adjusted $R^2 = .926$; $F = 2434.706$; $P = 0.000$

From Table 4, the following results are shown: standardized beta (β) of brand credibility (β = 0.962), adjusted R square = 0.926, F = 2434.706 and $p = .000 < 0.05$. This specifies that brand credibility explains 92.6 % variation in repeat patronage in upscale hotels in Port Harcourt, River State, Nigeria. The outcome of analysis show that brand credibility had positive significant effect on repeat patronage to the upscale hotels (β = 0.962, $p = 0.000 < 0.05$). Hypothesis one was therefore supported.

Hypothesis two

H2. Brand credibility has positive significant effect on hotel guests’ word of mouth communication

Table 5 describes the summary of the simple regression analysis showing the effect of brand credibility on word of mouth communication in upscale hotels in Port Harcourt.

Table 5. The simple regression analysis for the influence of brand credibility on word of mouth communication

Dependent variable	Independent Variable	Beta(β)	t-value	p-value
Word of Mouth Communication	Brand Credibility	.980	68.214	0.00**

Notes: $P \leq 0.05$; $R = .980$; $R^2 = .960$; Adjusted $R^2 = .960$; $F = 4653.108$; $P = 0.000$

From the Table, the following results are shown: standardized beta (β) of brand credibility ($\beta = 0.980$), adjusted R square = 0.960, $F = 4653.108$ and $p = .000 < 0.05$. This specifies that brand credibility explains 96.0 % variation in word of mouth communication in upscale hotels in Port Harcourt, River State, Nigeria. The outcome of analysis show that brand credibility had positive significant effect on word of mouth communication to the upscale hotels ($\beta = 0.980$, $p = 0.000 < 0.05$). Hypothesis two was therefore supported.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Effect of brand credibility and brand loyalty (repeat patronage and word of mouth communication)

The study findings reveal that brand credibility has significant effect on retention of hotel guests in Nigeria. In specific terms, brand credibility has significant relationship with brand loyalty of hotels in terms of repeat patronage, ($\beta = 0.962$, $p = 0.000 < 0.05$) and positive word of mouth ($\beta = 0.980$, $p = 0.000 < 0.05$) respectively. This result is consistent with previous studies (Sweeney & Swait 2008; Ghorban, 2012; Malik & Ahmad, 2014; Setyairan & Kussudiyarsana, 2015; Zayerkabe, et al., 2012; Azadi, et al., 2015;) carried out in several market contexts.

Generally the results demonstrate that brand credibility (via Trustworthiness and Expertise) significantly impacts on the stated choice behaviour of the hotel guests across all selected hotels. As argued by Gbenga, and Osotimehin, (2015) the quest to build and maintain trust with the customers is one of the fundamental strategies required to enhance the degree of customer loyalty especially in the hotel industry. Trustworthiness towards a brand by the target market defines a crucial relationship feature between a service organization and its customers (Ercis, 2012). This is crucial because of the dimension of intangibility associated with services marketing.

CONCLUSION

This study was conducted to ascertain the effect of brand credibility on two measures of brand loyalty (repeat patronage and word of mouth communication) in upscale hotels in Port Harcourt, Rivers State, Nigeria. This research effort has fulfilled its objectives by determining the effect of brand credibility on repeat patronage and word of mouth communication. The result of the statistical analysis, showed that brand credibility independently had positive significant effect on repeat patronage and word of mouth communication in the context of upscale hotels operating in the city of Port Harcourt, Rivers State, Nigeria.

The outcome of the research indicates that brand credibility affects repeat patronage and word of mouth communication in the same proportion. Thus, this study provides information for those who may want to examine further the effect of brand credibility on other measures of brand loyalty towards upscale hotels. It therefore becomes imperative that owners/managers of hotels should understand how a service brand like a hotel can build sustainable credibility as it affects the attitude of guests towards the hotels.

STUDY IMPLICATIONS

This current study examined brand credibility as predictor of brand loyalty in the context of upscale hotels operating in the city of Port Harcourt in a developing country, Nigeria. To a large extent, the study findings provide very useful and fruitful implications for academics and practitioners.

On the academic side, the study makes important and significant contribution to brand management as it concerns a service brand like a hotel. The findings of this study provides tentative support to the proposition that brand credibility should be recognised and treated as significant antecedent for positive attitudinal and behavioural intentions of hotel guests in the hospitality industry with emphasis on upscale hotels in Nigeria.

On the practitioners’ side, the significant effect of brand credibility on two important measures of brand loyalty is highlighted. Certainly, its implications are beneficial to hotel owners/marketers. For instance, given the robust effect of brand credibility on repeat patronage ($\beta = 0.962$, $p = 0.000 < 0.05$), and word of mouth communication ($\beta = 0.980$, $p = 0.000 < 0.05$), respectively, hotel owners/managers ought to pay attention to brand

credibility measures in their hotels. For example, by recruiting qualified employees and giving them proper training their degree of expertise and knowledge in their respective areas of competence will be enhanced. By so doing, hotel guests will be offered quality services at all times.

The implications of this finding is very crucial in many other respects. One, the findings is a demand on the owners/managers of hotel to craft a better strategy capable of helping a service brand to enhance its credibility in the eyes of the target market. Two, the owners/managers of hotels could consider celebrity endorsement of their brand as a means of promoting trustworthiness (credibility) of the service brand.

LIMITATIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

The fact that data was collected from Nigerian guests in the study is a limitation that cannot guarantee the generalizability of the study findings. However, this could be improved upon if the study is replicated with the inclusion of other nationals.

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