



Determinants of passenger preference for long distance shuttle services in Nigeria

Agu Godswill Agu^{1*}, Madumere Humphrey Ikenna² and Uche Dickson Ben³

¹Department of Marketing, Abia State University, Uturu, Nigeria.

²Department of Marketing, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, Nigeria.

³Department of Marketing, Evangel University, Abakaliki, Nigeria.

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ABSTRACT

The growing demand for road transportation services and the increasingly competitive nature of the industry in Nigeria are indications that customers would favour firms that meet their expectations consistently. This study used the 7Ps model to assess the determinants of passengers' preference for road transport services in Nigeria with special attention on shuttle and long distance operators. Empirical evidence from a total of 217 respondents revealed among others that product, place, people, physical evidence and process variables are significant drivers of passenger preference for road transport operators, while price and promotion variables are weak drivers. This study provides insight into the key service factors that drive road transport customers' patronage and loyalty.

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INTRODUCTION

The competitive nature of the Nigerian road transport sector has remained a growing one since the advent of organized operators in the industry (Ogwo et al., 2015). Unlike the roadside, open-market operators whose activities appear to be anti-passengers, the organized operators have well thought out programmes and packages for the customers; seeking their satisfaction in the methods of providing transport services. The demand for road transport services in Nigeria is increasingly being noticed since the rail system became somewhat inactive; the cost of air transport has maintained a regular upward review that most people cannot afford it. The waterways are not generally accessible to many. Over 75% of the Nigerian population depends on road transport (Chidoka, 2009; Agu, 2015).

Although the operators are in the same macro environment where infrastructural facilities are not up to international standard, competitive strategies centre around the micro level environments which are internal

arrangements to provide and sustain good customer-driven service qualities. Very few out of the thousands of registered and unregistered roadside, open-market, fairly organized and organized transporters can drive the loyalty of customers.

Preferring one road transport operator to the other has remained a major characteristic of the patronage behaviour of Nigerian road transport customers. A customer can sacrifice some time, money and energy to locate a preferred road transporter.

Authorities in the field of marketing have identified different factors that can drive brand preference in a competitive marketing environment. Djerr and Zera (2015) in Ogwo et al (2015) observed that brand preference studies should concentrate on other patronage factors while keeping price and availability constant. Peter and Olson (2008) advocated that firms should concentrate mostly on advertising to create top-of-mind awareness and purchase. Also, Agu and Ogbuji (2008) identified fare, customer relations, route plied, assurance of comfort, nature of busses, location, history of ownership, avoidance of disappointment and safety assurance as the key drivers of customer loyalty in

*Corresponding author. E-mail: talk2godsag@yahoo.com.

the Nigerian road transport sector.

Statement of the problem

The increasing nature of business opportunities in the Nigerian road Transport Industry has led to the entrance of new, modern operators in the system. This has also kept competition high. Before now, as noted by Agu (2015), the road transport companies in Nigeria were mainly touted structured with little or no attention paid to safety, comfort and satisfaction of customers (passengers). However, the availability of many transporters in the shuttle and long-distance road transportation has redefined the nature and pattern of competition in the transport sector.

A cursory observation of the transport sector seems to suggest forcefully that a number of long-distance shuttle bus operators are at the point of collapse. Along this line, Agu and Ogbuji (2008) reported some of the decreasing customers' attraction to some long-distance shuttle bus operators though some operators appear to be commanding higher customer traffic. Unfortunately, limited studies have been conducted in this service sector to understand the determinants of customer preference of shuttle bus.

Although Agu and Ogbuji (2008) examined patronage factors generally in the transport sector, they did not employ a model in the investigation. This study is also an attempt to bridge the gap by employing 7Ps model in the study of determinants of long-distance shuttle preferences by customers.

Objectives of the study

The broad objective of this study is to determine the factors that predict customers' preference for long-distance shuttle services in Nigeria using the seven Ps (7Ps) model of product, price, place, promotion, process, physical evidence and people.

Significance of the study

This study will reveal the various segments of the 7Ps that drive preference in the road transport business in Nigeria. This will help to guide the operators on their marketing strategy formulation. Customers will benefit through enhanced knowledge regarding both core and augmented products associated with transport services. This knowledge may increase their negotiation and discriminatory power in their choice of bus operators. The study will also be useful to future researchers who might lay hands on it.

Scope of the study

The study involved seven of the leading and organized road transport services providers in Nigeria. The units of analysis in the study were the customers of the firms found in their major terminals across country.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Concept of brand preference

In marketing literature, the word preference means the desirability, likeness or choice of an alternative. Preferences are above all behavioural tendencies (Zajonc and Markus, 1982). Brand preference is the consumer's predispositions toward a brand that varies depending on the salient beliefs that are activated at a given time; the consumer biasness toward a certain brand; the extent to which a consumer favours one brand over another (Davis, 2014). It is a measure of brand loyalty in which the consumer chooses a particular brand in presence of competing brands, but will accept substitutes if that brand is not available (Karen, 2011). Again, Davis (2014) disclosed that brand preference reflects a desire to use a particular company's product(s) or service(s) even when there are equally-priced and equally-available alternatives. Brand preference is noted to be a desire to seek out a specific product or service even when it requires paying more or expending more effort to obtain it. It is important to companies because it provides an indicator of their customers' loyalty, the success of their marketing tactics, and the strength of their respective brands, and gives competitive edge to the brand and the producer (firm). For this study this definition for brand preference is adopted: "the biased behavioural tendencies reflecting the consumer's predisposition toward a brand". As pointed out by Szablowski and Resenberg (2015), brand preference is driven by new and engaging media that catch people on the run. To ensure that a brand is preferred to others, identifying the target market, managing the legalities, securing celebrity endorsement among others have been advocated by scholars such as Karen (2011), Ebrahim (2013) and Isik and Yasar (2015). Fournier (1998) once pointed out that a brand in fact is simply a collection of perceptions that are held in the minds of the consumers and have no objective existence at all other than through the activities of the managers that administer it. The stronger the brand position is in the consumer's mind, according to Simon (2011), the more essential source of differentiation it becomes, and this a fundamental competitive advantage. According to Isik and Yasar (2015), brand preference is regarded as a key step in consumer decision making, involving elements of choice. In establishing brand preference, consumers compare

and rank different brands by focusing on their uniqueness. Brand preference is “the extent to which the customer favors the designed service provided by his or her present company, in comparison to the designated service provided by other companies in his or her consideration set,” with a consideration set referring to brands that a consumer would consider buying in the near future (Jin and Weber, 2013).

Consumer preferences for brands reflect three responses: cognitive, affective and conative or behavioural (Grimm, 2005). The cognitive components encompass the utilitarian beliefs of brand elements. The affective responses refer to the degree of liking or favouring that reflects consumer feelings towards the brand. The conative or behavioural tendencies are denoted by as the consumers’ predicted or approached act towards the object. Kotler et al. (2003) posits that strong brand equity results in customers showing a preference for one product over another, although the products could be basically identical. According to Simon (2011), for many companies, their single biggest asset is their brand. Since the road industry in Nigeria has firms with different categories of offering (brands); for instance, the shuttle services, the coach services, the mini-bus services etc., it becomes imperative to understand the key drivers of preference amongst passengers, especially given the competitive nature of the road transport industry in Nigeria.

The nature of Nigeria’s road transport sector

Transportation has been defined in many ways by many scholars. Many scholars have examined its definition in forms of economic development (Rodrigue and Nottemboom, 2013; Onolemene, 2013; Njoku, 2009; Ikpechukwu and Ureal, 2012) and as a key element of the physical distribution function of marketing that makes the movement of goods from the point of production to the point of consumption and or resell possible (Anyanwu, 2013; Agbonifoh et al., 2007; Okpara, 2012; Onah and Thomas, 2004; Inyanga, 1998; Olakunori, 2006; Kotler and Keller, 2007). Despite various conceptualization of transportation, it occupies a strategic position in the economic and social activities of people (Agu, 2015).

As noted earlier, the Nigerian road transport system was characterized by the use of old, outdated, risky and overloaded cars, buses and coasters in moving people within short and long distances. The system was also characterized by the presence of touts used as drivers and loading assistants (conductors) who tend to show unprofessional behaviours towards passengers in terms of abuse, insult and disrespectful treatment of passengers. In most journeys, the safety, comfort and overall satisfaction of passengers were less cared for as

most drivers focused on personal gains. Though this system is not yet completely off in the road transport system of the country, efforts have been made to attract organized corporate organizations which seem to render modern, customer-oriented road transport services to the teeming Nigerian population who travel daily. Today, the open-market road transport services and the organized transport services co-exist, each group serving a particular class or segment of the total market.

According to Chidoka (2009) the road transport system in Nigeria accounts for over 75% of mobility needs of the country. The national network is currently estimated to be 194,200 km of which 34,120 km (17.6%) are federal, 3050 km (15.7%) are State, while 129,580 km (66.7%) are local and rural roads (Agu, 2015). Of these figures, 36,900 km of Federal and State main roads representing 19% are paved, while 25,700 km (13%) are unpaved. Also, 21,900, 72,800 and 35,900 km representing 11, 38 and 19% are urban roads, main rural roads and village access roads respectively (CBN Statistical Bulletin, 2003). The CBN Statistical Bulletin (2011) shows that between 2001 and 2005, the aviation segment contributed 0.04, 0.05, 0.04, 0.04, and 0.05%, respectively, while ocean contributed 0.19, 0.21, 0.24, 0.26, and 0.20%, respectively. The bulk of the contributions of the transport sector to GDP since 1981 come from the road segment with 5.93% as the highest ever in 1982, while 2.77, 2.97, 2.96, 4.08, and 5.29% is from 2001 to 2005, respectively.

The Nigerian road transport industry is becoming increasingly competitive as the operators have continued to learn and adopt strategic business approaches in their services (Agu, 2015; Aderamo, 2012; Akinwale, 2010).

Theoretical framework

This study was based on the 7Ps model of services marketing propounded by Booms and Bitner (1981) and the theory of rational choice used by Voicu (2007).

7Ps model of services marketing

This model extended the traditional marketing mix elements (4Ps) to seven. The marketing mix refers to the 4P’s namely the product, price, promotion and place (Kotler and Armstrong, 2006). They are also known as the competitive weapon or the marketing arsenal which are designed to influence consumer decision-making and lead to profitable exchanges. The 7Ps model, also known as the services marketing mix, goes beyond the four basic marketing principles for product marketing. Services have unique characteristics, for example intangibility, heterogeneity, inseparability and perishability. Booms and Bitner’s (1981) insight in relation to



Figure 1. 7Ps model of services marketing mix elements. Source: Booms and Bitner (1981).

physical products and services led to an extension of the traditional marketing mix from three to seven. The model is shown as Figure 1. The elements are briefly explained one by one under the empirical review.

Product strategy and preference

The road transport sector is known for the provision of various travelling options to passengers as well as the provision of accompanying services to customers. In most organized road transport firms in Nigeria, various classes of buses are made available to customers at varying prices. For instance, ABC Transport Plc. has Regular Coach Services; usually non-air conditioned long distance Macapolo bus, Executive Coach; which is air conditioned, sleeper coach for night travelers, Smart coach which is a mini-coach of 27 Seaters, unlike the regular and executive coaches that contain 54 seaters. There is also the splinter bus for long distance travelers, cargo trucks, and haulage trucks among others. Each of these segments of the company represents product to the target customers. Studies have proved that the product influences preference. For instance, Miquel (2002) proposes that individuals show as much interest in the product type as the brand and actively seek out information in their decision-making. Also, Shugan and Ramarao (2001) reveal that rapid changes in technology have a significant effect on consumer purchases. Isik and Yasar (2015) as well as Ebrahim (2013) shared similar view in their studies.

H₀₁: There is no significant relationship between product variables and customers’ preference for long-distant shuttle private owned buses.

Pricing strategy and preference

Pricing is one of the traditional 4P’s outlined in the marketing mix strategy of a company and also a key element in the 7Ps model of services marketing (Jin and Yong, 2005; Wood and Barry, 2006). Borden (1984) identified the dimensions of price as list price, discounts, allowances, payment term and credit terms (Borden, 1984). Hence, the earlier literature confirms that pricing has a significant effect on customer motives.

Many of today’s value-conscious consumers may buy products more on the basis of price than other attributes (Peter and Donnelly, 2007). Berman (1996) reports that among the pricing policies which are of major concern to retail store outlets are the ‘High-Low Pricing’ and Every Day Low Pricing (EDLP) strategies.

In the road transport industry, the fare and other service charges represent the price paid by customers. Some road transport customers may be price sensitive; demanding economic pricing, while others may be innovators who value good quality services at any cost. Segmenting the services just like ABC Transport would ensure that the interests of many are captured.

H₀₂: There is no significant relationship between price variables and customers’ preference for long-distant

shuttle private owned buses.

Promotion strategy and preference

Promotion is the drum beater of a brand. It is defined as sales promotion, advertising, personal selling, public relations and direct marketing (Borden, 1984). According to Duncan (2005), promotion is the key to the market exchange process that communicates with present and potential stakeholders, and the general public. To create awareness about a brand and to make more preferred, Karen (2011) sees promotion as an inevitable tool. Ferle and Steven (2006) find that the effectiveness of product advertisement in television is still doubtful. Ailawadi et al. (2006) find that the net impact of promotions is still negative. In another research, Gedenk and Scott (1999) report that in-store price promotions are associated with negative purchase event feedback compared to non-promotion purchases.

Promotions such as price discounts and buy one get one free are effective promotional tools for encouraging consumers to buy more (Shi et al., 2005). Hung (2005) recommends that plans for promotions should be top-down strategy built plans with tactical bottom-up purchase analysis and that they should be monitored frequently. Steinberg (2001) points out that a successful promotion often comes from a good imagination. The players in the Nigerian Road Transport Industry engage in different kinds of promotion programmes such as mobile advertising with company's inscriptions on all buses, point-of-purchase adverts, newspaper, radio, television, internet adverts, sales promotions, and publicity.

H₀₃: There is no significant relationship between promotion variables and customers' preference for long-distant shuttle private owned buses.

Place strategy and preference

Kotler and Armstrong (2006) define place or distribution as a set of interdependent organizations involved in the process of making a product available for use or consumption by consumers. Place strategy calls for effective distribution of products among the marketing channels such as the wholesalers or retailers (Berman, 1996). The dimensions of place are channels, coverage, assortment, location, inventory, and transport (Borden, 1984). Studies by Ahmed (2011), Adel (2005) and Kim and Hyun (2011) have found positive relationships between distribution intensity or efficiency and brand preference, loyalty and patronage. The road transporters in Nigeria lay much emphasis on convenient location. This is the reason behind the cluster of many road

transport companies along Egbu road in Owerri, Imo State. Passengers and other customers of the firms consider the location of the boarding terminal and the location of the arrival terminal. Ease of location, accessibility, service availability, and other factors are considered by road transport customers.

H₀₄: There is no significant relationship between place variables and customers' preference for long-distant shuttle private owned buses.

People and preference

The quality, skills and attitude of road transport employees to a larger extent determine customers' preference decisions (Agu and Ogbuji, 2008). The organized road transporters have such employees as front line staff; customer service officers, operations managers, waybill officers, security personnel, porters/lodgers, as well as offline staff, accounts officers, auditors etc., how these people relate to customers tells whether there will be repeat patronage, positive word-of-mouth and recommendation (Agu and Ogbuji, 2008).

H₀₅: There is no significant relationship between people variables and customers' preference for long-distant shuttle private owned buses.

Service process and preference

Authorities in the field of marketing management are of the view that product/service attractiveness to consumers can be enhanced by providing timely, quick and accurate or error free services (Anyanwu, 2008; Agu and Ogbuji, 2008). The customer experience can be positively influenced with consistent timely and accurate service delivery. In the Nigerian road transport sector, departure time adherence, ticket purchase stress, boarding arrangements etc., are elements under the service process. To what extent can this drive customer preference? The study of Agu and Ogbuji (2008) showed a positive correlation.

H₀₆: There is no significant relationship between process variables and customers' preference for long-distant shuttle private owned buses.

Physical evidence and preference

In all, the physical facilities available in an organization, especially services providers can drive patronage and preference. Such facilities as status of buses, the environment, building, office equipment etc., are

Table 1. Results of the Cronbach's alpha test and the factor loading for the customers.

S/N	Variable	No. of items	Cronbach alpha	Factor loading
1	Product	3	0.7026	0.6570
2	Price	3	0.8139	0.7542
3	Place	3	0.7600	0.6888
4	Promotion	3	0.7420	0.5997
5	People	3	0.8777	0.6543
6	Physical evidence	3	0.8561	0.7119
7	Process	3	0.7441	0.5768
8	Preference	3	0.8979	0.7212

Source: SPSS output.

Table 2. Distribution and retrieval of questionnaire.

Firm	Issued	Retrieved/used	Lost/not used	Percentage of used
ABC	30	27	3	13.85
GUO	37	30	0	15.38
Young	30	24	6	12.31
Chisco	30	30	0	15.38
Best Way	30	26	4	13.33
Peace Mass	30	28	2	14.36
God is Good	30	30	0	15.38
Total	217	195 (93%)	15 (7%)	100.00

assessed by passengers. The proposition that attractive common features are interpreted by consumers as additional reasons for choosing the initially preferred alternative is consistent with the dominance search framework (Montgomery, 1983 in Agu, 2015). The nature of buses, infrastructural facilities, terminal neatness, available equipment and all the contact and touch points represent the physical evidence in the road transport sector.

H₀₇: There is no significant relationship between physical evidence variables and customers' preference for long-distant shuttle private owned buses.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopted the survey design using structured questionnaire. The study population consists of customers of seven long-distance shuttle bus operators. The Cochran (1963) in Agu (2015) formula for infinite population was used to arrive at a sample size of 217. The likert scale was used to formulate questions. Reliability and Validity of Instrument were determined using the Cronbach's alpha test. Table 1 shows the result of the Cronbach's alpha test and the factor loading for the customers.

The results show that all the variables met the

minimum threshold for acceptance since they are up to 70% (0.70). Also, the values of the factor loading show that the variables are valid for study since they are above 50%. Multiple Regression Analysis at 0.05 level of significance in SPSS version 18 was applied.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Tables 2 and 3 show that out of the 210 copies of the questionnaire issued to the respondents, a total of 195 (93%) were retrieved and used while 15 (7%) were lost and not used. Table 4 shows that the nature of busses used by transporters is the overriding factor driving passengers' preference of a transport firm over others. With a total of 48 (25%) votes, this was rated first among others. Quality and skill of staff occupied second position with 45 (23%) votes. 26 (13%), 25 (13%), 24 (12%), and 4 (2%) were departure schedule, fare, service delivery time (waiting time), terminal location and promotional programs respectively for the third to the seventh positions. This shows that the promotional efforts of the transport firms have little or nothing to do in driving customer preference, patronage and loyalty. As shown on the model summary and ANOVA (Table 5), with an adjusted R Square value of 0.774 and a significance value of 0.037, this shows that the 7Ps are significant predictors of consumer preference of road transport

Table 3. Demographics of the respondents.

Option	Frequency	Percentage
Gender		
Male	112	57.44
Female	83	42.56
Age Bracket		
18 – 25	52	26.67
26 – 35	57	29.23
36 – 45	46	23.59
46 and above	40	20.51
Educational qualification		
O’Level/ND	63	32.31
HND/BSC	86	44.10
Masters and above	46	23.59
Marital Status		
Married	88	45.13
Single	107	54.87
Occupation		
Public/Civil servant	94	48.21
Business	48	24.62
Student/Unemployed	53	27.18

Table 4. Respondents’ key preference factors.

Option	Frequency	Percentage	Rank
Fare	25	12.83	4 th
Departure schedule	26	13.33	3 rd
Promotional programmes	4	2.05	7 th
Terminal locations	23	11.79	6 th
Quality and skill of staff	45	23.08	2 nd
Service delivery time	24	12.31	5 th
Nature of busses used	48	24.62	1 st
Total	195	100.00	

Table 5. Test of hypotheses (Here, all the seven hypotheses are tested using multiple regression).

Model summary						
Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R square	Std. error of the estimate		
1	0.976 ^a	0.953	0.774.	3.25.		
a. Predictors: (Constant), process, price, promotion, people, product, place, physical evidence						
ANOVA^a						
Model	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	
1	Regression	80485.200	193	20121.300	27.372	0.037 ^b
	Residual	0.000	0			
	Total	80485.200	193			

a. Dependent variable: Preference; b. Predictors: (Constant), process, price, promotion, people, product, place, physical evidence

Table 5. Contd.

Model	Coefficients ^a						
	Unstandardized coefficients		Standardized coefficients	T	Sig.	95.0% Confidence Interval for B	
	B	Std. error	Beta			Lower bound	Upper bound
(Constant)	-7.437	0.000		2.572	0.000	-7.437	-7.437
Price	0.285	0.000	0.076	1.477	0.696	0.285	0.285
promotion	-0.260	0.000	-0.144	2.394	0.832	-0.260	-0.260
1 People	-0.502	0.000	-0.926	3.873	0.000	-0.502	-0.502
Process	1.551	0.000	1.860	3.683	0.027	1.551	1.551
Place	1.653	0.000	1.928	2.886	0.000	1.602	1.602
Physical evidence	1.892	0.000	1.986	2.572	0.000	1.724	1.724

a. Dependent variable: preference

Table 6. Values coefficients and decisions of the hypotheses.

Hypotheses	T value	P value	Decision
Ho ₁	3.474	0.000	Reject null hypothesis and accept the alternative
Ho ₂	1.477	0.696	Reject alternative and accept null hypothesis
Ho ₃	2.394	0.832	Reject alternative and accept null hypothesis
Ho ₄	2.886	0.000	Reject null and accept alternative hypothesis
Ho ₅	3.873	0.000	Reject null and accept alternative hypothesis
Ho ₆	3.683	0.027	Reject null and accept alternative hypothesis
Ho ₇	3.128	0.000	Reject null and accept alternative hypothesis

companies.

However, the coefficients values show that price and promotion do not significantly predict preference since the P values are above 0.05. Therefore, for the hypotheses, the decisions are as shown in Table 6.

The test shows a very strong relationship between product variables (service quality, safety standards, routes plied) and passengers' preference. This is in line with the studies of Agu and Ogbuji (2008). Also, this shows that there is positive relationship between price, place, promotion, people and physical evidence and preference of road transporters. This is in line with the findings of Chintagunta (1993), Croft (1993), Dawes, (2004) and Erdem and Sun (2002). On price, however, our study shows a very weak relationship between price and road transporter preference. The study of Agu and Ogbuji (2008) shows a negative relationship on this.

Conclusion

The increasing rate of demand for road transport services and the intense competitive environment are wakeup

calls to operators on the need to be customer-centric in their marketing activities. This is in the area of marketing management. There is the need to synchronize the variables in the 7Ps of road transport service marketing to be in line with the current demands of target customers. This study has identified the factors that matter most to shuttle and long distance customers in Imo state.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are made:

Road transport firms that wish to survive the present competitive pressure in the industry are required to manage their 7Ps effectively paying more attention to the product, place (location), people [drivers, frontline staff, for example, ticket sellers, process and physical evidence (buses, facilities etc.)] as these are key drivers of preference and patronage.

Critical attention should be given to the nature of buses used, quality and skills of personnel as well as adherence

to scheduled departure time.

In drafting marketing strategy using the 7Ps model, transport operators are encouraged to be customer-centric and uphold the marketing concept that sees the consumer as the king. This will help to move more preference to patronage and further to loyalty.

The government should monitor the operations of road transporters to ensure that customer satisfaction is not suppressed.

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