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Product Quality Influence on Corporate Reputation: Evidence from Retail Firms in Nigeria

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Article Information

Keywords
Corporate Reputation, Customer Trust, Product Quality, Quantitative Research, Retail Firms

Article History

Received: Jun 18, 2024
Accepted: Sept. 23, 2024
Published: Oct 3, 2024

Abstract

In today's retail business, the quality of a product can significantly impact a company's corporate reputation, as customers often associate product quality with the overall reputation of retail firms. This study examines the influence of product quality on corporate reputation, with evidence from retail firms in Nigeria. A quantitative research design was employed, focusing on customers of selected retail companies in Lagos State, namely Shoprite, Buyrite, and Spar. A survey method using questionnaires was utilized to collect primary data. The sample size was determined to be 246, and multistage sampling techniques were employed. Of the 246 distributed questionnaires, 150 were retrieved and coded for analysis. Standard multiple regression was used to analyze the data. The results indicate that product quality significantly influences corporate reputation in store-based retail outlets in Lagos State. The study concludes that well-designed quality products that satisfy customer needs, serve their intended purpose, and meet industry standards effectively build trust and sustain corporate reputation. It recommends that retail service providers establish a sustainable corporate reputation through high-quality products to enhance customer confidence and trust. The underlying premise is that higher perceived product quality leads to increased customer patronage.

Introduction

Quality has long been regarded as a critical aspect of competitive advantage, and thus, improving the quality of products and services has become a major concern for organizations. Firms that offer both high-quality services and products have a significant edge in ensuring customer satisfaction and securing customer loyalty. Additionally, for a service firm to achieve notable success, it must be committed to enhancing the quality of its services in line with the demands of its esteemed customers (Adebayo, 2023). As customers expect quality products on retail store shelves, the capability and capacity of retail service providers to meet this expectation will inevitably boost sales and positively impact the nation's economy. Retailing contributes approximately 5.8% to the compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of Nigeria's economy (MarketResearch.com, 2021). The sector, which includes both wholesale and retail activities, is the third-largest contributor to the nation's GDP, accounting for about 16% of the total (Obayagbona, 2022). It is also one of the largest sources of employment in Nigeria, despite the government's reliance on revenue from crude oil and gas.

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In today's highly competitive retail sector, effective, up-to-date, and high-quality service breeds consumer satisfaction, which ultimately ensures customer loyalty, repeat purchases, and store attraction. However, many retail service providers face challenges in upgrading the quality of their products and services. According to Ling and Shaheen (2018), many managers agree that retail business success heavily depends on improving product and service quality to meet customer demands. Product quality is a critical starting point for providing customer satisfaction and gaining loyalty. Offering quality products helps maintain customer satisfaction and loyalty while reducing the risk and cost of replacing damaged or spoiled goods (Adebayo, 2023). Retail businesses can build a reputation for quality by achieving recognized and notable quality standards.

Moreover, organizations need to communicate to their esteemed customers the uniqueness of their offerings, their social responsibility, and their commitment to selling reliable and high-quality products. This involves building trust through corporate reputation (Taghian et al., 2012). In service businesses, particularly in retail, the close interaction between employees and customers in delivering high-quality services highlights the importance of the company's image and reputation in establishing customer relationships. A company's reputation is one of its most valuable assets in achieving competitiveness. Reputation is built from the perceptions stored in the memories of stakeholders, including customers and employees. The way employees and customers perceive the company's reputation and image is crucial in today's business world. A company's reputation can take years to build but only moments to damage; thus, it remains one of the most significant assets in achieving competitiveness. Reputation reflects product quality and brand trust, as perceived by consumers. A strong reputation can enhance customer satisfaction and attraction.

In service marketing literature, the common link between corporate reputation and satisfaction is perceived quality. A strong corporate reputation for high quality attracts more customers, reduces dissatisfaction, and increases profitability. Satisfied customers are likely to spread positive word-of-mouth recommendations (Weigelt & Camerer, 2018). Anderson and Sullivan (1993) also argue that high customer satisfaction fosters a positive corporate reputation. Therefore, this study aims to investigate how product quality contributes to building corporate reputation in service firms, with a specific focus on selected store-based retail businesses in Lagos State.

Literature Review
Theoretical Foundation

Product Quality
Kotler and Keller (2012) conceptualize a product as anything that can be presented to a market for attention, acquisition, use, or consumption, and that has the capacity to satisfy a want or need. Quality has been defined from four perspectives: excellence, value for money, consistency to requirements, and meeting customer requirements (Reeves & Bednar, 1994). More broadly, product quality refers to a product's ability to meet or exceed customer expectations. The most common operational definition of quality views it as the customer's perception of product and service excellence. In today's competitive environment, quality is crucial for an organization's success and survival. Intense global competition from multinational companies has heightened the

importance of quality, transforming it from a characteristic of competitors into a validation of a company's ability to compete (Giffi et al., 1990). Product quality is a key component of a successful competitive strategy.

Zeithaml et al. (2018) view quality as superiority or excellence, while Aaker (2004), as cited by Ehsani (2015), suggests that product quality is the customer's perception of the general quality or uniqueness of a product or service in relation to its anticipated purpose and alternatives. Kotler et al. (2012) emphasize that quality is an attribute of a product or service that depends on its ability to satisfy stated or implied customer needs. Razak et al. (2016) argue that product quality should be assessed from the customer's perspective, determined through market research to understand consumer needs and wants. According to this view, two significant factors shape product quality: anticipated product quality and perceived product quality. If perceived product quality aligns with expectations, the customer will consider the product to be of high quality, leading to satisfaction, loyalty, and preference. Conversely, if perceived product quality does not meet expectations, the product will not be regarded as high quality. Essentially, the classification of quality depends on a company's ability to meet customer expectations. Kotler and Keller (2012) identify several indicators of product quality, including performance, features, reliability, compliance, durability, serviceability, aesthetics, and perceived quality.

Corporate Reputation

Reputation is challenging to conceptualize because it depends on the views, intentions, and expectations of various stakeholders regarding an organization's performance (Nwagu, 2022). Stakeholders, particularly investors and suppliers, may perceive a firm's reputation differently from its customers. While both groups are involved with the organization, customers focus on quality and satisfaction, whereas business partners and suppliers assess financial and overall business performance. Reputation can be broadly described as a perceptual representation of a company's past actions and future prospects, reflecting the firm's overall appeal compared to its competitors (Fombrun et al., 2001). Previous studies have shown that perceived product quality significantly affects corporate reputation (Gatti et al., 2012) and brand image (Liu et al., 2014). Perceived product quality also influences customer perceptions of a brand (Liu et al., 2014), and high-quality products tend to enhance a company's reputation.

Fombrun et al. (2000), cited in Nwagu (2022), link corporate reputation with economics, strategy, marketing, organizational theory, sociology, communication, and accounting. They argue that corporate reputation is a collective construct that reflects the aggregate perception of many stakeholders about a company's performance. This justifies why reputation is difficult to define, as it depends on stakeholders' perceptions. According to Iwu-Egwuonwu (2011), after an organization becomes known, it undergoes assessment based on its behavior, community involvement, business conduct, product and service quality, and social responsibility. This assessment forms the organization's image in stakeholders' minds.

The terms "image" and "reputation" are often used interchangeably in service quality literature. Bromley (2013) defines image in the context of reputation as "a synopsis of the perceptions held by external stakeholders." From this perspective, self-perception is measured by others' views. For external stakeholders, particularly customers, image is defined by their beliefs and feelings about the company based on their experiences and observations (Bernstein, 2004). Regarding the impact of corporate reputation, Bronn (2015) asserts that a good reputation provides a competitive advantage because it is valuable, rare, and irreplaceable. Companies with high reputations are more likely to influence customer behavior, attitudes, and preferences towards their products and services (Kircova, 2018). Corporate image and reputation facilitate customer evaluation of service quality and satisfaction (Andreassen & Lindestad, 1998; Zins, 2001), as positive perceptions lead to higher satisfaction and loyalty (Brodie et al., 2009).

Theoretical Review

Resource-Based Theory

Resource-Based Theory (RBT) was first introduced by Penrose (2009), who developed a model on the valuable management of firms' resources, diversification strategy, and productive opportunities. RBT provides a framework for understanding organizational performance and competitive advantage, focusing on internal resources rather than external factors affecting organizational activities (Kozlenkova et al., 2014). The theory emphasizes resources that are difficult to imitate as sources of sustained competitive advantage (Barney, 1991). RBT is based on two key assumptions: First, firms possess unique bundles of resources (Helfat & Peteraf, 2003). Resource heterogeneity among firms distinguishes competitive advantage, with inimitable resources enabling firms to perform specialized activities and gain a competitive edge. Second, the difficulty of trading resources across firms contributes to persistent differences in resource capabilities.

Previous Studies

Subiyantoro (2021) found that the ease and quality of a product significantly affect customer satisfaction, while service quality and price do not. The exploratory study, involving 140 customers selected through convenience sampling, used Partial Least Squares (PLS) analysis. The results indicate that service quality, convenience, price, and product quality all significantly impact customer loyalty, which in turn affects customer satisfaction. Diputra and Yasa (2021) examined the effects of product quality, brand image, and brand trust on customer satisfaction and loyalty for Samsung smartphones in Denpasar. The study, involving 185 respondents from Denpasar City and using purposive sampling, employed path analysis through Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) with AMOS. The findings reveal that product quality positively affects brand image, brand trust, and customer satisfaction, with brand image and trust also positively influencing satisfaction.

Hadi and Indradewa (2019) studied the effects of service quality on corporate reputation, customer satisfaction, and loyalty. The research, involving 250 forklift rental customers from PT. Kianis Pratama in Indonesia and using Structural Equation Modeling, found that high service quality improves corporate reputation and customer satisfaction, which in turn enhances customer loyalty. Razak and Nirwanto (2016) investigated the effects of product quality and price on customer satisfaction, testing the mediating role of customer value. Their quantitative study, using a positivist paradigm and Structural Equation Modeling, found that the quality of toothpaste, conforming to production standards, is crucial for customer satisfaction. Tanković

(2015) conducted a conceptual paper examining corporate identity, image, and reputation. The study identified confusion and mismatch in their usage due to cross-disciplinary research. A new two-dimensional model was proposed, addressing challenges such as validating the model empirically and expanding it with new research advancements. Ugwuanyi et al. (2021) explored the relationship between corporate reputation and customer satisfaction using a survey research design. Reliability was assessed through Cronbach's alpha, and data analysis involved correlation and multiple regression. The study, involving 135 respondents, found that trustworthiness, corporate social responsibility, credibility, and reliability all positively impact customer satisfaction. The conclusion is that corporate reputation, with its multifaceted dimensions, has a significant positive relationship with customer satisfaction in the mobile telecommunications industry.

Methodology

This study adopts a quantitative method to assess the effect of product quality on corporate reputation in selected store-based retail outlets in Lagos State. The population of the study is considered infinite as it focuses on the customers of three major store-based retailing companies (Shoprite, Buyrite, and Spar), each with branches in Lagos State. Given the infinite nature of the population, the sample size was determined using Godden's (2004) model, resulting in an estimate of 246. A survey method was employed using a self-administered questionnaire to gauge the opinions and attitudes of the target respondents on the subject matter.

The 246 questionnaires were distributed through random sampling via mall intercept, with assistance from sales interns at the retail outlets to select respondents and administer the questionnaires. All variables (Product Quality and Corporate Reputation) were measured using respondents' agreement levels on a five-point Likert scale: strongly disagree, disagree, neutral, agree, and strongly agree. To ensure the validity of the instrument, content validity was employed. The instruments were validated by the researcher's assistant, who has substantial expertise in the subject matter, to ensure the questions aligned with the study's focus. Although the items used were adopted from previous literature, the reliability of the instrument was confirmed to account for any amendments. A multistage sampling technique was applied, involving different sampling methods at various stages to select respondents. The data were analyzed using SPSS version 26.

Results

Table 1: Validity Statistics

	Validity Test	KMO	Barlett's Test	Sig.
i.	Product Quality	.636	59.565	.000
ii.	Corporate Reputation	.684	61.342	.000

Source: *Researcher's Fieldwork Computation, 2024*

Table 2: Reliability Cronbach's Alpha Coefficients Table

	Variables	Cronbach Alpha Coefficients
i.	Product Quality	.743
ii.	Corporate Reputation	.751

Source: *Researcher's Fieldwork Computation, 2024*

Mean and Standard Deviation of the Product Quality

The mean and standard deviation presented in Table 3 reveal that there are 10 items representing product quality with two sub-constructs (Product Conformity to Specification and Standard Product). All items recorded high levels of mean scores. "Store with high performance and consistent quality products enjoys store loyalty" had the highest mean score (M = 4.00, SD = 1.062), whereas "Stores with good products compared to competitors attract customer attention" had the lowest mean score (M = 3.87, SD = 1.008). Therefore, "Store with high performance and consistent quality products enjoys store loyalty" is identified as the primary characteristic representing product quality in the selected retail stores in Lagos, Nigeria.

Table 3: Mean and Standard Deviation of Product Quality

Code	Detail	Mean	SD
Product Conformity to Specification			
SC1	Store with high performance and consistent quality products enjoys store loyalty	4.00	1.062
SC2	Outlets selling product that conform with specifications enjoys high and continuous patronage from the customers	3.96	1.092
SC3	Stores with a product with good physical features guarantee customer satisfaction	3.95	1.166
SC4	Stores with standard product that conforms with regulatory bodies directives enjoys customer loyalty	3.97	1.172
SC5	Customers' perception of the quality of the products display in the store guarantee the quality of store service	3.90	1.079
Standard Product			
STP1	Stores with good products compared to competitors' attract customer's attention	3.87	1.008
STP2	Retail outlets with a products that has beautiful features generate more customer traffic	3.99	1.141
STP3	Stores with a products that retains its quality and functions for a long time attract customer attention	3.97	1.184
STP4	Store's service that permit customer to return product for technical fix guarantee repeat patronage	3.90	1.134
STP5	Service provider's effort to provide reliable product guarantee store loyalty	3.94	1.044

Sources: *Field Survey, 2024*

Mean and Standard Deviation of the Corporate Reputation

The mean and standard deviation presented in Table 4 reveal that there are five items representing corporate reputation. All items recorded high mean scores. "Outlets with reliable, low, and consistent prices enjoy the continuous patronage of customers" had the highest mean score (M = 4.03, SD = 1.077), whereas "Customers build trust in a retail firm that sells locally manufactured products" had the lowest mean score (M = 4.01, SD = 1.083). This indicates that "Outlets with reliable, low, and consistent prices enjoy the continuous patronage of customers" is the main characteristic representing corporate reputation.

Table 4: Mean and Standard Deviation of Corporate Reputation

Code	Detail	Mean	SD
COR1	Store that is environmentally responsible in term of packaging gain customer loyalty	4.01	1.126
COR2	Outlets with reliable, low and consistent price enjoys the continuous patronage of customers	4.03	1.077
COR3	Customers patronize retail business with good corporate social responsibility.	4.01	1.111
COR4	Customers build trust in a retail firm that sells local manufactured products	4.01	1.083
COR5	Customers' perception of retail store with standard and regulated products and services build customer satisfaction	4.01	1.084

Sources: *Field Survey, 2024*

Hypothesis Testing

Product Quality and Corporate Reputation

Multiple regression analysis was used to examine the relationship between Product Quality (Standard Product and Specification Conformity) and Corporate Reputation in selected store-based retail outlets in Lagos State.

Table 5: Model Summary[b]

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	Durbin-Watson
1	.545[a]	.460	.347	.94263	1.921

a. Predictors: (Constant), Standard Product, Specification to Conformity

b. Dependent Variable: Corporate Reputation

Sources*: Researcher's Survey, 2024*

The model summary in Table 5 shows that the R-Square value is .460, indicating that 46% of the variation in corporate reputation is explained by product quality (specification conformity and standard product), while the remaining 54% is due to other variables not included in the model. This suggests that the model is useful for making predictions.

Table 6: ANOVA[a]

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	8.110	2	5.185	4.710	.010[b]
	Residual	120.617	147	.889		
	Total	135.988	149			

a. Dependent Variable: Corporate Reputation

b. Predictors: (Constant), Standard Product, Specification to Conformity

Sources*: Researcher's Survey, 2024*

Table 6 shows that the regression sum of squares (8.110) is large compared to the residual sum of squares (120.617), indicating that the model fits well in explaining the variation in corporate reputation. The F-value (4.710) with a significance value of 0.010 ($p < 0.05$) suggests that product quality can significantly influence corporate reputation.

Table 7: Coefficients[a]

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	2.632	.431		6.101	.000
	Spec. Conformity	.091	.080	.092	1.135	.008
	Standard Product	.228	.087	.213	2.620	.010

a. Dependent Variable: Corporate Reputation

Sources*: Researcher's Survey, 2024*

Table 7 reveals that product quality significantly influences corporate reputation. Hypothesis H1a, predicting a positive relationship between product specification conformity and corporate reputation, is supported ($\beta = 0.091$, $t = 1.135$, $p = .008$). Hypothesis H1b, predicting a positive relationship between standard product and corporate reputation, is also supported ($\beta = 0.228$, $t = 2.620$, $p = .010$). This analysis indicates that product quality has a significant influence on corporate reputation in store-based retail.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The study concludes that a well-designed quality product that satisfies customer needs, serves its purpose, and meets industrial standards will significantly contribute to building trust and sustaining the corporate reputation of a retail business. Regression analysis conducted to test the hypothesis revealed that the two sub-variables used to proxy product quality (i.e., standard product and product conformity to specification) have a significant and positive relationship with corporate reputation. This indicates that a quality product that meets customer needs, serves its purpose, and adheres to industry standards effectively builds trust and sustains corporate reputation in retail marketing management. Effective management of customer traffic through quality products that satisfy needs, increase patronage, and ensure continuous orders, alongside merchandising products that conform to specifications and standards, is crucial. This approach enhances customer expectations and perceived value, thereby supporting product quality and customer loyalty.

The study recommends that firms focus on creating a sustainable corporate reputation through quality products that attract more customer traffic. Increased traffic generally leads to higher patronage, resulting in greater sales and profits. Additionally, maintaining quality products on store shelves fosters customer loyalty, aids in establishing brand recognition, and supports efficient cost management. The major limitation encountered was difficulty accessing respondents for primary data collection. Some respondents were uncooperative, failing to complete or return questionnaires. These challenges were mitigated with the assistance of retail store interns, who helped contact respondents. Future research could explore the use of customer satisfaction as a mediating variable. This study noted that not all aspects of corporate reputation stem from product quality. Researchers could also investigate new variables to improve the hypothesis model. Expanding the geographical scope could provide more comprehensive insights.

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