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Brand Equity and Consumer Response in the Fast Food Industry in Port Harcourt, Rivers State, Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to determine the relationship between brand equity and consumer response in the fast food industry in Port Harcourt, Rivers State, Nigeria. The research adopted the descriptive survey design. The study population was 65 fast food firms registered with the Rivers State Ministry of Commerce and Industry, Port Harcourt as at May, 2021. The study accepted the entire firms as study units and employed the Taro Yamane's formula to arrive at the sample size of 56. The simple random sampling technique was adopted to determine the respondents. A sample of 3 managers (1 marketing manager, 1 sales manager and 1supervisor) of each fast food firms weredrawn, resulting in a total of 168 respondents. One hundred and sixty-eight (168) copies of the questionnaire were administered to the respondents. However, after the error check and cleaning process, only 142 (84.5%) copies were considered as adequate and suitable for inclusion in the study. The hypotheses were tested using the Pearson's Product Moment Correlation Coefficient and aided by the use of Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 25.0. The analysis revealed that there is a significant relationship between brand awareness and all the measures of consumer response. Also, the analysis revealed that there is a significant relationship between brand association and purchase intention but the relationship between brand association and brand preference is insignificant in the fast food industry in Port Harcourt, Rivers State, Nigeria.

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This study concludes that brand equity has significant positive effect on consumer response. The study therefore recommends that brand equity practice must be positively influenced by firms through brand strength, brand description and aimed at improving consumer response. The study also recommends that firms should realize the dimensions of brand equity that drives consumer response and emphasize on them.

INTRODUCTION

Because of the rapid changes in the local and international markets, the increased competition experienced between businesses, and the complexity of customers, business organizations have been compelled to reconsider a wide range of business practices and procedures. Product distinction, consumer loyalty, and consumer preferences are all strengthened by good brand management, which may result in a bigger market share for the company in question. Developing and nurturing a brand should not be considered a major operational goal in most sectors, but rather as a source of competitive advantage in these industries. Or, to put it another way, successful branding raises the value of a business's brand (Chen, 2011).

Several companies have discovered the importance of a brand, and numerous academic researchers have investigated this sector and written articles and books on the subject. However, despite the fact that brands can be complex, Beamish and Ashford (2012) argue that they ultimately rest in the minds of purchasers as a basis for connecting with a product, a quality, or an image that has been portrayed. Brand equity was described for the first time by Aaker in 1991 terms of its five basic components. In addition to perceived quality, these components included brand loyalty, name recognition, perceived quality, and brand associations, amongst other things. Consumers rely on intangible features when making purchasing decisions. According to building theory, a brand, therefore, comprises of more than just physical components. As defined by classical test theory, a brand is a well-known product (or service), person (or location), or concept that has been enhanced in such a way that the buyer or user perceives meaningful, unique added value that is most closely matched with their needs (Moss, 2014).

In the field of brand development, building brand equity is widely viewed as a crucial component. Many benefits are predicted to flow from a company's brand value, according to industry expectations. Consider the fact that high levels of brand equity are related with improved consumer preferences and purchase intentions, which is well known. Brand-name companies are known for having high stock performance, and this is also true for smaller companies. A greater amount of research into the measurement of consumer-based brand equity is required because branding is an important tool for distinguishing oneself from the competitors. To differentiate a brand from competitors, one of the most essential competitive positioning tactics is to emphasize the brand's defining characteristics and distinctiveness in relation to the competition. While the strategic value of branding has long been recognized in the marketing literature, it is only recently that marketers have realized that brands have the ability to provide long-term competitive advantages for organizations. If people prefer one particular brand over another, it stands to reason that the company that manufactures that brand may have a competitive advantage over its competitors.

Brands which have higher equity can get the customer's preferences and tendencies and result in higher level of sale. Therefore, since any manager wishes to have a strong brand, it is expected that the factors of brand equity affecting consumer's response be evaluated more precisely. Moreover, with regard to the effect of brand equity dimensions on the brand's consumer response, it is likely that they can be merged in casual model to obtain clearer and more precise results.

Previous studies have tried to establish a relationship between the variables of brand equity and consumer behaviour. Amegbe (2016) found that customer based brand equity affects consumers' willingness to pay price premiums, consumers' attitude towards brand preference and purchase intention at the newly open West Hills Mall in Ghana. Satvati, Rabiei and Rasoli's (2016) discovered a positive relationship between brand equity and consumer behaviour.

In the pharmaceutical industry, it is critical to build an organization's brand by leveraging its intangible assets (such as corporate reputation). Evidence reveals that firms with a consistent corporate strategy and the ability to translate that strategy into its brand strategy will outperform their counterparts that have a less defined and inconsistent corporate ethos (Hatch, Schultz, Williamson, Fox, & Vinogradoff, 2011). With the passage of time, the retail industry has become increasingly complicated and exposed to a wide range of important forces. The implications of these are that participant organizations must actively assess how they are regarded by their main stakeholders (Kapferer, 2015).

There has been a dearth of research into the valuation of brand ownership in the fast food industry, which is unfortunate. In order to explain the growing popularity of this category and provide some insight into why fast food companies are gradually moving away from their traditional branding and toward corporate identity, only a few studies have been conducted so far. Besides this aspect, there is the matter of the difficulty that marketers face when selecting accurate branding choices for their items. Marketers at consumer goods firms are intimately involved in the manufacturing process and have a thorough awareness of the products they are selling to the public. They have a competitive advantage over their competitors since they are involved in the research and development process from the beginning (MacKay, 2011).

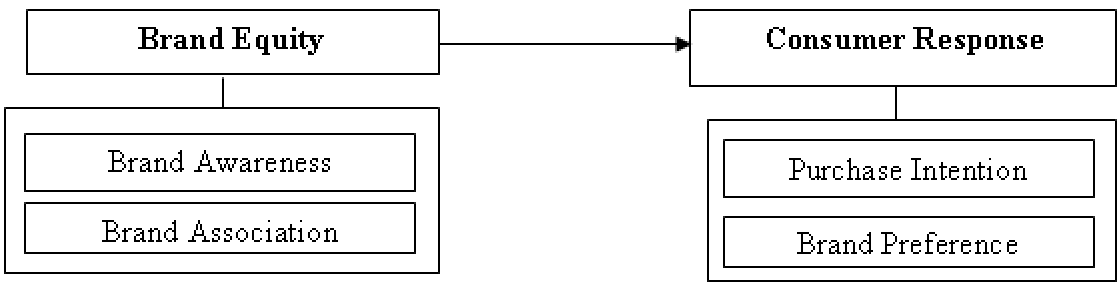
In recent years, as a result of globalization and technological improvement, fast food corporations have increasingly encountered increased competition on a local and regional level as well. In the past, businesses would market and sell their products on the basis of facts and data, and new products would be easy to identify from those of their competitors. This has, however, begun to change in recent years. Furthermore, growing scrutiny of operating and research methods, as well as tough issues about the safety of marketed drugs, have caused uncertainty in what has long been considered a stable and highly profitable industry. Companies must brand and launch new products into existing and new markets as rapidly as possible in order to reap the maximum benefit from a limited patent life and to recover development expenditures as quickly as possible. A number of recent product recalls, which occurred despite quality assurance processes and regulatory requirements, have led many consumers to believe that manufacturers have lost sight of their original vision of improving human existence and are more concerned with increasing profits than they are with improving humanity. Because of a lack of trust, brand equity has suffered, and businesses are grappling with the issue of regaining that trust. As a result, in order to stay up with severe competition, brands and businesses are attempting to modernize their operations. Also, many companies have acknowledged the value of branding and have reformed their organizations to include marketing and brand advocates (Marvel & Ye, 2018).

However, little attention has been paid to the branding of the company or its worth in the market (Marvel & Ye, 2018). Muiya and Kamau(2013) found that the ultimate choice and decision made by a consumer is heavily dependent on the brand,based on their research into the influence of brand management techniques on consumers' perception at five large supermarkets in Kenya. Furthermore, the findings of the study demonstrated that the output can be either an opinion decision or an action. Each of the eight types of decision styles is defined as follows: quality conscious, brand conscious, fashion conscious, recreational and hedonistic orientation, price conscious, impulsive and careless tendencies, confused by alternative options, and brand loyal. Winters (2016) investigated the factors that influence brand loyalty and discovered that the final choice was influenced by each step of the decision-making process. As a result, the literature on the subject has demonstrated two diametrically opposed perspectives on how marketers are involved in marketing and branding strategy development.

The purpose of this study is to determine the relationship between brand equity and consumer response in the fast food industry in Port Harcourt, Rivers State, Nigeria. In view of this the following research questions were posed to guide this research:

1. Is there any significant relationship between brand awareness and consumer response in the fast food industry in Port Harcourt, Rivers State, Nigeria?
2. Is there any significant relationship between brand association and consumer response in the fast food industry in Port Harcourt, Rivers State, Nigeria?

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework of Brand Equity and Consumer Response



Source: Desk Research, 2022

LITERATURE

Concepts of Brand Equity

Brand equity is the monetary value that customers attach to a particular brand. The term "Brand Equity" relates to the perception of consumers rather than any objective metrics (Chen, 2011). According to studies, brand equity is one of the most effective intangible assets that drives company value (others include investments in research and development, patents and databases, human capital, and software development).

According to Batra, Lehmann and Singh (2013), brands are significant assets, accounting for percent of a company's market value on the stock market. It is possible to think of the brand as the fifth most important corporate resource, after people resources, things, money, and information (Marvel & Ye, 2018). The concept of brand equity has piqued the interest of marketing academics as well as marketing professionals. When it comes to brand equity, one of the most important questions to examine is how it should be defined and quantified. A conceptual framework for assessing customer-based brand equity is constructed by conceptualizing Aaker's five elements of brand equity and applying them to the measurement of customer-based brand equity. Due to the fact that brand equity is directly associated with brand loyalty and brand extension, it has piqued the interest of business strategists from a wide range of industries. According to Oliver (2017), brand equity has been investigated from both a financial and a customer-based standpoint.

Using brand equity as an indicator, a company may determine what type of name value is connected with the brands that it advertises to the general public and how this form of intangible asset contributes to the firm's long-term success and growth. Consumers' associations with positive attributes such as honesty, integrity, and quality are measured in this manner in order to determine how closely the brand name is associated with those values. If the name is worth a lot, it signifies that it gives a significant

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value to the company in terms of revenue generation and public acceptance. A low brand valuation indicates that the company is doing little to improve its reputation, and it may be more of a problem than an asset in the long run.

The concept of brand equity aids in the comprehension of the process of creating shareholder value. Intangibles have become increasingly valuable as a result of the widening disparity between their book values and stock market valuations, as well as dramatic increases in premiums paid above the stock market value of a company's stock (Leone, Rao, Luo, McAlister, & Srivasta, 2016). Brand equity must be separated from other key performance indicators such as brand revenue and profit in order to be effective as a construct that describes a brand's value to the brand holder. The establishment and maintenance of client connections plainly entails monetary outlays on the part of the company.

Consumers, customers, employees, other firms, or any relevant constituency have a different response to the words and actions of a corporate brand entity than they do to other corporate brand entities. Keller (2010) defines corporate brand equity as follows: “the differential response by consumers, customers, employees, other firms, or any relevant constituency to the words and actions of a corporate brand entity than they do to other corporate brand entities.” In other words, corporate brand equity is the sum of all of the benefits received as a result of any action taken on behalf of the corporation and its brand. It is possible to generate positive corporate brand equity by promoting the corporate brand to a targeted and/or relevant audience over time (Keller, 2010). Almost every move taken by a firm has an impact on the company's brand equity. A study by Macharia(2019) found that by communicating the brand to all of its stakeholder groups in an effective and cohesive manner, the business was able to maximize its brand equity.

Brand equity is built on strong, favorable, and distinctive associations that people have with a company's brand (Keller, 2010). According to him, brand equity is built on the foundation of a company's image, and the dimensions of the company's image have an impact on corporate brand equity. The goods of an organization, the acts of an organization, and the method in which an organization communicates all contribute to the organization's corporate image. The characteristics of the organization's employees may also have an impact on the organization's corporate image associations. The views of corporate brand are influenced by the behaviors of the entire organization, and all of the actions of the corporation are involved in this perception-making process. According to Hayduk (2013), pictures of the company that are appealing and desirable in the eyes of stakeholders are expected to impact stakeholder behavior in ways that contribute to the development of corporate brand equity. This implies that the organization should seek to establish such relationships.

Brand equity can also be developed by activities that are not directly related to the brand, such as charitable donations or behaviors that are ecologically conscious (Keller, 2010). According to Kamakura and Russell (2017), when it comes to developing corporate brand equity, the brand name has even more significance than when it comes to product branding. It is because there's a larger audience, and it's important for the brand name to provide consistent information about the company. According to them, the brand name is the primary driver of the development of brand equity. In addition, the name serves as an anchor for brand equity. The importance of core values in corporate branding is highlighted by Macharia (2019) who asserts that the factors linking core values and the corporate brand are pivotal for the development of corporate brand equity, and that the goal should be to define unique and useful core values that are difficult for competitors to imitate.

Dimensions of Brand Equity

It is vital for companies to have access to real and credible consumer-based brand equity instruments in order to properly manage their brands. A brand building strategy should be acknowledged as the most successful means of conducting business due to the continuous changes in the marketing environment. This will help to enrich the practice of brand management by adding to its breadth. Producers that are successful in their brand building can strengthen their competitive position, allowing them to compete more effectively against the expanding power of retailers. Apart from these advantages, brand building can also bring advantages such as the ability to defend against competitors as well as the potential to expand market share.

Brand is beyond a name and is a key part of management. Although brand is not a goal itself, it can be an important tool to evaluate the general performance of an organization. Brand can create the value for customers and result in more revenue for the company. Brands will have more success and better performance in this regard if they intelligently and continuously evaluate themselves. The different dimensions of brand equity can be assumed as an important factor in the growth and decline of the general performance of a brand. Brand equity is an added value that is created due to the brand name and knowing its dimensions can make a better understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the brands in markets and it can make the comparison of a brand and its rivals easier. With a strong brand, a customer's attitude will be strengthened, as will the strength of the product link with the brand. The ability to maintain a positive attitude is created via exposure to the product. Customer awareness and association have an impact on inferred qualities, perceived quality, and, ultimately, brand loyalty in the long run. Furthermore, the advantage of this dimensionality of brand equity is that it allows marketing managers to examine how their marketing activities increase the perceived value of their brands in the minds of their customers.

The conceptualization of brand equity in the present research is based on customer perceptions, as presented in the framework. Researchers have used a variety of different conceptualizations of brand equity to quantify its effectiveness. Aaker in 1991 identified brand equity as a multidimensional notion that is comprised of perceived attributes, brand loyalty, brand awareness, brand association, and other propriety assets, among other things. Brand loyalty, in his opinion, has everything to do with the level of devotion a consumer has to a certain brand. Patents and trademarks are the other exclusive brand assets that can be acquired. The three most essential components of brand equity that influence valuation are brand awareness, which has multiple levels ranging from mere recognition of the brand to domination, brand associations, which can receive associations from a variety of sources, and brand affiliations with other brands.Dimensions of brand equity were adapted from the works of Biyani and Gupta (2018).

Brand Awareness as a Dimension of Brand Equity

Brand awareness is about the strength of a brand’s presence in the consumer’s mind. In this context it should be thought as the strength of the brand presence in the stakeholders’ minds. Brand awareness refers to the ability of a potential buyer to recognize a particular brand among those in a given product category. Perceived quality is concerned with the consumer's perception of the complete quality or superiority of a brand's products.

Brand equity may be built on for example brand recognition. According to King (2015), an entrepreneur or the leader of the organization can have a significant role in brand recognition in SMEs. He or she is a source of inspiration and organization in the organization, but also the actual personification of the brand. It should be important to make sure that this is being exploited in the organization as a source of brand awareness and in that way as a source of brand equity.

Balmer and Gray (2013) have highlighted that in corporate branding, the brand name and/or logo are

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important elements creating brand awareness and recognition, as well as signs of trust and assurance of the organization. Accordingly, the name, the logo and the slogan of the organization are part of corporate design. King (2015) has noted that creating only one brand is a good way to prevent awareness being fragmented away.

Brand Association as a Dimension of Brand Equity

Anything that is associated with a brand in a consumer's memory is referred to as brand association. Brand associations are everything which connects the stakeholders to the brand. These include user associations, properties of the brand, operating situations, associations about the organization or characters or symbols of brand personality, as well as common product attributes together with benefits and attitudes, people, relationships and corporate credibility. Especially important in the corporate brand context are the associations about the organization. According to Beamish and Ashford (2012), at corporate branding level the brand identity is more abstract compared to product branding, and thus also the associations become more abstract.

Brand association is associated with thoughts, feelings, perceptions, pictures, beliefs, and attitudes that are tied to a product (Keller, 2010). Chen (2011) divides brand association into two categories: product association and organization association. Product association is the most common type of brand association. Products are associated with non-functional features (intangible attributes) such as social image, perceived value, trustworthiness, distinction and place of origin as well as functional attributes (tangible attributes). Organizational affiliations include affiliations for corporate ability, affiliations for corporate social responsibility, and so on. The promise or guarantee of quality is represented by the guarantee function. It is based on the evaluation that the brand is dependable, efficiently performs its performance characteristics, and satisfies the expectations that have been set forth. This function should also be associated with the idea that the brand is associated with items offering an acceptable degree of performance and that the brand is concerned with conveniently serving consumer needs while also contributing variety and innovation (Dubois & Duquesne, 2015). It is related to the fact that customers can identify with certain brands and create feelings of affinity towards them that the personal identification function is performed. In the literature on brand influence, a fundamental theory refers to the degree to which the consumer's behaviour, his self-image, and the product image are consistent with one another. This theory is predicated on the notion that individuals can enhance their self-image by interacting with and purchasing products from brands that they identify with. So the theory argues that greater consistency between a brand's image and the consumer's self-image results in a positive appraisal of a brand and an increase in the likelihood of a consumer purchasing a product.

Corporate brand, seeing the brand as an organization, generates organizational associations. These organizational associations can be attached to the brand as part of the brand identity. Thus, the two sides of branding should be corresponding; the actual brand identity should be similar to the view of stakeholders about the brand, the brand image. For the brand to succeed, the brand should be developed so that the associations reflect and are part of the brand identity. King (2015) has recommended that as a source of brand equity, SMEs could concentrate on a few brand associations, perhaps on one or two most important ones. The organization can focus on a creatively developed marketing program based on these associations.

Concepts of Consumer Response

Consumer Response is the good or negative feedback a firm receives about its products, services, or business ethics. Alternatively, a customer reaction might be requested by a business or initiated by a consumer. Depending on the situation, a letter or responses to queries regarding a product or issue within the organization may be required. Customer feedback can assist a firm in improving the overall quality of a product or service it provides. For example, if an automobile manufacturer wants to determine how satisfied customers are with a new vehicle in general, it can send questionnaire to all of its customers. To collect the information, a corporation can send a postage-paid envelope to the customer. The organization can then distribute the information to engineers, salespeople, and other departments after it has been gathered and verified. A customer's answer might be beneficial to both the customer and the company. The corporation gains from the ability to gather information that can be used to improve or repair a product in the future. For example, if a client reports that a bookcase is too difficult to construct, a corporation might gather the information and make changes to the product. Customers gain from a customer response because they have the opportunity to express their opinions about a product and persuade a company to adjust the product as a result of their opinions. Hamilton-Ibama (2020) posited that consumers are sophisticated choice makers that go for any alternative products or services in the market place while searching for satisfaction. It is therefore, not surprising that marketers invest fortune on research in order to know basic facts about the buying behaviours of consumers so as to design marketing strategies that would influence consumption decisions.

A strong brand with positive equity positively influences firms' performance through its effect on consumers' responses towards brands. The effect of brand functions on consumer response constitutes a highly important subject when analysing the value the brand has for the firm. The competitive advantages that result from a positive brand image can be categorized into three general components: (1) advantages related to current performance and profitability (the brand's ability to command higher margins and/or volume, more inelastic consumer response to price increases, increased marketing communication effectiveness and greater trade co-operation), (2) advantages related to longevity of profits (brand loyalty, less vulnerability to competitive marketing actions, less vulnerability to marketing crises), and (3) advantages related to growth potential (possible licensing opportunities, generation of positive word-of-mouth, brand's ability to introduce new products as brand extensions). Some loyalty programmes maybe initiated in order to increase differentiation loyalty, raising barriers to entry for new brands and allowing firms to benefit through mechanisms such as price rises (Ogonu& Hamilton-Ibama, 2020).

Measures of Consumer Response

Many industries have seen a huge increase in consumer response. Based on how a cereal manufacturer's product is received by children and their parents, the company may see an increase in earnings. By soliciting information from its customers, a clothes retailer may be able to determine why particular items aren't selling in various sectors of the store. While some people may be frustrated by telemarketing phone calls and mailings from a company, the information is maintained at many companies for years and is taken into consideration when a new product or service is developed by the company. Some businesses provide consumers with a disclaimer stating that they will not disclose their personal information with any third parties. This promise has the potential to encourage customers to provide information in some cases. Measures of consumer response were adapted from the works of Albert and Whetten (2015).

This study explores three of these consumer responses: willingness to pay a price premium, brand preference and purchase intention. The willingness to pay a price premium reflects the amount a consumer is willing to pay for a brand in comparison with other brands offering similar benefits. The literature on brand equity indicates notable impact on consumers' willingness to pay a price premium (Green & Srinivasan, 2018). Brand equity makes consumers less sensitive to price increases (Keller, 2010) and more willing to pay a higher price since they perceive some unique value in the brand that no other alternative can provide (Muiya & Kamau, 2013).

Purchase Intention as a Measure of Consumer Response

Purchase intention is the implied promise to one's self to buy the product again whenever one makes next trip to the market (Kapferer, 2015). It has a substantial importance because the companies want to increase the sale of specific product for the purpose to maximize their profit. Purchase intention depicts the impression of customer retention. There are certain functions of the brand, which have a strong influence on the purchase intention of the customer's i.e. brand image, product quality, product knowledge, product involvement, product attributes and brand loyalty. It is very important to determine the exact features, which the consumer wants. This will help the marketers to focus on the features of the product that are significant and are positively correlated with purchase intentions of the customers. The customer driven approach is applied to find out the perception of users to have an exact idea about preference and desires. Purchase intention is one of the main concepts studied in the marketing literature.

Several studies have reported a positive correlation between purchase intentions and purchase behaviour (Ateke & Iruka, 2015). Moreover, marketing managers are interested in consumer purchase intentions in order to forecast sales of existing and/or new products and services. Purchase intentions data can assist managers in their marketing decisions related to product demand (new and existing products), market segmentation and promotional strategies. Studies have reported an indirect effect of values and involvement, and a direct effect of consumer satisfaction (MacKay, 2011; Oliver, 2017) on purchase intentions. There is a debated issue on the relation between perceived quality and purchase intentions. Some scholars have found a direct relationship between perceived quality and purchase intentions, whereas some others have reported an indirect relation mediated by satisfaction (Green & Srinivasan, 2018).

Brand Preference as a Measure of Consumer Response

The notion of preference has been considered by different disciplines, such as marketing, economics, psychology and sociology. However, there is no commonly-agreed definition of preference among these disciplines. For example, economics state that preferences are exogenous, stable, known with adequate precision and are revealed through choice behaviour. The economic view of preference was criticized for assuming that preferences are stable and endogenous. An individual's preferences are not stable and can be endogenous or exogenous. In marketing, the concept of preference means the desirability or choice among alternatives (Beamish & Ashford, 2012). While Anderson and Gerbing (2019) propose that "a preference is a behavioural tendency that exhibits itself not so much in what the individual thinks or says about the object, but how he acts toward it". They differentiated between four types of consumer preferences; the actual preference is the degree to which the consumer appreciates and develops the capacity to use certain goods. Meta-preferences are one's preferences about actual preferences that reflect the normative judgments of the higher-order self (meta-self). True preferences are a unique set representing what is really and truly the best for the person. Finally, unrestrained preferences are those that satisfy the lower or physical needs. The individual's preferences are determined by his or her actual preferences that reflect the meta-preferences and unrestrained preferences.

Brand Equity and Consumer Response

Amegbe (2016) carried out a study to understand customer based brand equity and its effect on consumers' willingness to pay price premiums, consumers' attitude towards brand preference and purchase intention at the newly open West Hills Mall in Ghana. The data for the study was collected from 400 customers who went to shop at the West Hills Mall. Using a confirmatory factor analysis and path analyses it was found out that brand preference and purchase intension is significantly related to brand equity. However, consumers’ willingness to pay price premiums is not significantly related to brand equity.

Buil, Martinez and Chernatony (2013) conducted a study to propose and test a model to better understand brand equity. They sought to investigate the effects of this construct on consumers' responses using data from two European countries. Hypotheses were tested using structural equation modelling (SEM). Measurement invariance and stability of the model across the two national samples was assessed using multi-group confirmatory factor analysis. Results indicate that Brand awareness positively impacts perceived quality and brand associations. Brand loyalty is mainly influenced by brand associations. Finally, perceived quality, brand associations and brand loyalty are the main drivers of overall brand equity. Findings also corroborate the positive impact of brand equity on consumers' responses. In addition, the general framework proposed is found to be empirically robust across the studied countries. Only a few differences are observed. Findings provide useful guidelines for brand equity management. Managers can complement financial metrics with consumer-based brand equity dimensions to track brand performance over time and to benchmark against other brands. Building brand equity generates more value for corporations since a more favourable consumer response results from positive brand equity.

Satvati, Rabiei and Rasoli (2016) study was conducted to investigate the relationship between brand equity and consumer behaviour. In today's competitive world, where the consumer is faced with a broad range of products made in different countries, companies should further seek to identify the factors of customers' trends towards products to encourage customers to select and purchase the product. In the model proposed in this study, the relationship between brand equity and the dimensions of consumer behaviour including the willingness to pay for extra cost, brand preference and purchase intention is investigated. The research method is a descriptive correlational. Structural equations and descriptive and inferential statistics and factor analysis were used to analyse the data. The statistical population of the study includes the owners of Grand Vitara, Sportage and Santafe from the companies of Iran Khodro, Kia and Hyundai. The population was unlimited including 384 people using Cochran formula; and cluster sampling and endemic questionnaire tool were used. According to the results, it seems that there is a relationship between brand equity and consumer behaviour including paying extra cost, brand preference and purchase intention.

Brand Awareness and Consumer Response

Bhaya (2017) carried out a study that aimed to know the natural relation between the brand awareness and customer satisfaction on Zain Iraq's Mobile Cell Phone Company. The study was based on data which gathered from 90 respondents from a user of the services, company by using a questionnaire. The study used random sampling technique and statistical tool (SPSS), to know the result of this research the correlation and Regression analysis are used. The research result indicates that the brand awareness impact on the customer satisfaction measures.

Observing brand awareness as an important variable that impacts customer's perceptions of a brand, Karam and Saydam (2015) conducted a study of improving brand awareness and its impact on consumer behaviour via media with their case study on Fast Food Restaurants in North Cyprus. They opined that achievement in brand management arises from understanding and overseeing brand image and loyalty correctly to create strong characteristics that will impact consumers when making their decisions. Their thesis concentrates on the importance of these dimensions (brand awareness, brand loyalty, brand image and consumer behaviour) of customer built brand equity in light of consumer's perceptions of a brand. This is focused around the assumption that all these dimensions of customer based-brand image and loyalty will have impact on consumer's perceptions of brand. However, this study aims to discover which among these three dimensions (brand image, brand loyalty and consumer behaviour) seem to have the slightest brand equity in restaurants and to find out whether customer based-brand equity differ between fast food with respect to each characteristic of brand awareness, brand image, consumer behaviour and brand loyalty. Brand awareness was treated independently from different dimensions because of the difference in scale, and moreover media and sorts of media effect on consumer behavior. An organized survey was constructed to provide answers to research question. In this study, one hundred and fifteen copies of the questionnaire were distributed. The research studied four dimensions of consumer's based-brand equity specifically brand awareness, brand image, perceived quality and brand loyalty. Among the three dimensions, brand loyalty seems to have the minimum brand equity rating by consumers than alternate dimensions.

Mackay (2011) and Oliver (2017) carried out a study and reported an indirect effect of values and involvement and a direct effect of brand awareness on purchase intention. Pramod (2017) findings noted that consumers prefer those brands which are known and familiar to them, hence, making brand awareness the virtual step and foundation for brand preferences.

Brand Association and Consumer Response

Shrestha (2015) carried out a study that tried to examine the impact of brand association functions on consumer response in the smart phones industry. 204 samples were approached. Descriptive statistics and structural equation model were applied to summarize and validate the hypothesized model. The result showed that brand identification and personal identification is the two major factors of brand associations. Customer's perception towards stylishness, smartness and personal profile (high level) makes them to pay premium prices of smart phones and they are willing to accept smart phones.Viktorija and Lina (2017) and Lina (2018) findings indicated that proper association development positively and directly influences consumer purchase intention.

Belen del Rio, Vazquez and Iglesias (2011) conducted a study on the effects of brand associations on consumer response. The paper studies the dimensions of brand image, focusing on the functions or value of the brand as perceived by consumers. In this way, four categories of functions are identified: guarantee, personal identification, social identification and status. By way of hypotheses, it has been proposed that these functions have a positive influence on the consumer’s willingness to recommend the brand, pay a price premium for it and accept brand extensions. The hypotheses have been tested in the Spanish sports shoes market and were partially supported. The results obtained confirm the convenience of analysing brand associations separately and enable the ascertaining of the brand associations that are the most relevant in order to attain certain consumer responses. The study of Aron and Kenny (2012) and Shrestha (2015) agrees that brand association plays a vital role to consumer decision.

Perera, Wanninayake and Kimari (2021) carried out a study on the mediating effect of self- concept on brand association and conspicuous consumptions: A study in the context of luxury fashion brand market in Sri Lanka. The target population of the study is the global middle-class population who spend purchase power parity more than 10$ and less than 100$ a day per capita and the rich (upper) class population who spends more than 100$ a day per capita. The sample size of the study was 634 respondents. Both the online survey and field interviews were simultaneously carried out as data collection methods. Both descriptive and inferential statistics were used to present and analyse the data. Further the main data analytical tool which was used for the present study was PLS-SEM 3. The SPSS version 25 software was also used for the other analysis needed for the study. Based on the findings it

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was revealed that there is a significant relationship between brand association and conspicuous consumption. Further it was discovered that there is a mediating impact from self-concept to the relationship between brand association and conspicuous consumption. Accordingly, this research offers useful guidance to decision makers of the existing brands in the current market as well as the new brands in the context of the luxury brands market in Sri Lanka in planning their marketing strategies, to shape their marketing communication, segmenting their markets based on the findings given in the study.

Methodology

This research adopted the descriptive survey design. This design gives a clear picture of a situation and serves as a basis for most researchers in assessing the situation as a prerequisite for drawing conclusion. The study population is 65 fast food firms registered with the Rivers State Ministry of Commerce and Industry, Port Harcourt as at May, 2021. The study accepted the entire firms as study units and employed the Taro Yamane's formula to arrive at 56 as the sample size of the study. The simple random sampling technique was adopted to determine the respondents. A sample of 3managers (1 marketing manager, 1 sales manager and 1 supervisor) of each fast food firms are used, resulting in a total of 168 respondents. One hundred and sixty-eight (168) copies of the questionnaire were administered to the respondents. However, after the error check and cleaning process, only 142 (84.5%) copies were considered as adequate and suitable for inclusion in the study. The hypotheses were tested using the Pearson's Product Moment Correlation Coefficientand aided by the use of Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) 25.0

Results

Analysis on the association between Brand Equity and Consumer Response is carried out at a 95% confidence interval and a 0.05 level of significance. The Pearson Product Moment Correlation (PPMC) coefficient is adopted in the assessment of the significance of the relationship between the dimensions of brand equity (brand awareness and brand association) and measures of consumer response (purchase intention and brand preference).

Test of Hypothesis One

There is no significant relationship between brand awareness and purchase intention in the fast food industry in Port Harcourt, Rivers State, Nigeria.

Table 1: Correlation Test between Brand Awareness and Purchase Intention

		Brand Awareness	Purchase Intention
Brand Awareness	Pearson Correlation	1	.299**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	142	142
Purchase Intention	Pearson Correlation	.299**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	142	142

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

Source: Research Data, 2022 (SPSS output version 25.0)

From the result in Table 1, it is shown that a very strong positive relationship exists between brand awareness and purchase intention. The *rho* value 0.299 indicates this relationship and it is significant at p 0.000<0.05. Thus, there is significant relationship between brand awareness and purchase intention.

Test of Hypothesis Two

There is no significant relationship between brand awareness and brand preference in the fast food industry in Port Harcourt, Rivers State, Nigeria.

Table 2: Correlation Test between Brand Awareness and Brand Preference

		Brand Awareness	Brand Preference
Brand Awareness	Pearson Correlation	1	.226**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		
	.007		
	N		
		142	142
Brand Preference	Pearson Correlation	.226**1	
	Sig. (2-tailed)		
	N		
	.000		
		142	142

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

Source: Research Data, 2022 (SPSS output version 25.0)

From the result in Table 2, it is also shown that a very strong positive relationship exists between brand awareness and brand preference. The *rho* value 0.226 indicates this relationship and it is significant at p 0.000<0.05. Thus, there is significant relationship between brand awareness and brand preference.

Test of Hypothesis Three

There is no significant relationship between brand association and purchase intention in the fast food industry in Port Harcourt, Rivers State, Nigeria.

Table 3: Correlation Test between Brand Association and Purchase Intention

Brand Association Purchase Intention			
Brand Association	Pearson Correlation	1	.351**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		
	.008		
	N		
		142	142
Purchase Intention	Pearson Correlation	.351**1	
	Sig. (2-tailed)		
	N		
		.000	
		142	142

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

Source: Research Data, 2022 (SPSS output version 25.0)

From the result in Table 3, it is also shown that a very strong positive relationship exists between brand association and purchase intention. The *rho* value 0.351 indicates this relationship and it is significant at p 0.000<0.05. Thus, there is significant relationship between brand association and purchase intention.

Test of Hypothesis Four

There is no significant relationship between brand association and brand preference in the fast food industry in Port Harcourt, Rivers State, Nigeria.

Table 4: Correlation Test between Brand Association and Brand Preference

		Brand Association	Brand Preference
Brand Association	Pearson Correlation	1	.253**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		
	.010		
	N		
		142	142
Brand Preference	Pearson Correlation	.253** 1	
	Sig. (2-tailed)		
	N		
	.010		
		142	142

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

Source: Research Data, 2022 (SPSS output version 25.0)

From the result in Table 4, it is also shown that a very strong positive relationship exists between Brand Association and Brand Preference. The *rho* value 0.253 indicates the strength of this relationship and it is insignificant at p 0.010<0.05.Thus, there is no significant relationship between brand association and brand preference.

Discussions of Findings

The purpose of the present research is to examine the relationship between brand equity and consumer response. The results of PPMC correlation test suggested a significant positive relationship between the dimensions of brand equity (brand awareness and brand association) and the measures of consumer response of fast food industry in Port Harcourt, Rivers State, Nigeria.

Brand Awareness and Consumer Response

A positive correlation was observed to exist between brand awareness and purchase intentions. The *rho* value 0.299 indicates this relationship and it is significant at p 0.000<0.05. The results are in agreement with the findings of Karam and Saydam (2015), who opined that achievement in brand management arises from understanding and overseeing brand image and loyalty correctly to create strong characteristics that will impact consumers when making their decisions. The study also agrees with the findings of MacKay (2011) and Oliver (2017) who reported an indirect effect of values and involvement, and a direct effect of brand awareness on purchase intentions.

Also, a positive correlation was observed to exist between brand awareness and brand preference. The *rho* value 0.226 indicates this relationship and it is significant at p 0.007<0.05. The resultis in agreement with the findings of Pramod (2017) who proposed that brands reduce buyer's risk and makes the decision making process simpler, noting that consumers prefer those brands which are known and familiar to them, hence, making brand awareness the initial step and foundation for brand preference.

Furthermore, this present study findings is in line with the study of Martinez and Chernatony (2013), Bhaya (2017), Karam and Saydam (2015). They opined that brand awareness impacts on consumer when making their purchase decisions.

Brand Association and Consumer Response

A positive correlation was observed to exist between brand association and purchase intention. The *rho* value 0.351 indicates this relationship and it is significant at p 0.000<0.05. The resultis in agreement with the findings of Viktorija and Lina (2017) who opined for proper association development positively and directly influences consumer purchase intentions. They further proposed that positioning of the brand is extremely important when seeking to develop brand associations; the naturalness, ecology of the product should be emphasised in marketing communication. Finally, the result agrees with the findings of Lina (2018) who posited that a brand name should be meaningful and visual marketing communication should expose the ecology.

Also, a positive correlation was observed to exist between brand association and brand preference. The *rho* value 0.253 indicates the strength of this relationship and it is insignificant at p 0.010<0.05. Thus, there is no significant relationship between brand association and brand preference. This result is not in line with the findings of Aron and Kenny (2012) who indicated the differential effects of brand associations such as price perceptions, brand personality, brand-elicited feelings, self-image and brand-user-image congruency on consumer brand preferences. The present study result also does not agree with the findings of Shrestha (2015) who opined that customer's perception towards stylishness, smartness and personal profile (high level) makes them to prefer brands against competitors and association plays a vital role to this effect.

Perera, Wanninayake and Kimari (2021) study revealed that there is a significant relationship between brand association and conspicuous consumption. Their study is not in line with this present study finding.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study on brand equity and consumer response in the fast food industry in Port Harcourt, Rivers State, Nigeria has made salient findings that will be helpful both to theorists and marketing practitioners, especially in the service sector. The study found out that there is a strong relationship between all the dimensions of brand equity and all the measures of consumer response in the fast food industry in Port Harcourt, Rivers State, Nigeria.

This study therefore concludes that brand equity has significant positive effect on consumer response. Brand equity is positively inclined to bring about customer’s purchase intentions, which in turn will lead to a higher market share on the verge of brand preference.

Based on the findings and conclusion we recommend that

1. Marketers should realize brand awareness as an effective driver of consumer response.
2. Brand association practice must be positively influenced by firms through brand strength, brand description and aimed at improving consumer response.
3. Managers of fast food firmsshould provide up-to-date and efficient services (especially in quality product content), provide constant support (24 hours), promote appropriate behaviour and accountability of the employees, and employ straightforward, user-friendly machinery to increase the quality of their services and, thus, improve their performance.

4. The firm should provide special services that are difficult for competitors to imitate and also can influence the consumer response of fast food services such as fair commissions upon repeat patronage, increased security, and maintenance systems for preventing system failures, and multiple payment methods.

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