ONLINE STORES AND CUSTOMER TRAFFIC IN ORGANIC FOOD FIRMS IN PORT-HARCOURT

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Abstract
The aim of this paper was to investigate the nexus between online stores and customer traffic among organic products firms in Port Harcourt. It has been observed that few consumers buy organic products through online stores, notwithstanding the fact that organic products easily deteriorate, and hence, need to be quickly moved from the farm to consumption ends. Primary data, collected through structured questionnaire, from 160 managers of (40) organic product firms in Port Harcourt, together with secondary data from same, were analysed using the Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficient aided with the Statistical Package for Social Sciences, version 25.0. The outcome of analysis indicated significant positive relationship between online stores and customer traffic. This paper, therefore, recommends that organic firms in Port Harcourt that want to beef up their sale performance can achieve this, indirectly, by attracting high level of customer traffic through the adoption of online stores.
Keywords: Customer traffic, Online stores, Organic products, Physical distribution, Sales performance

Introduction

Organic farming involves the use of organic fertilizers such as farm yard and green manure for growing crops, roughage feed, outdoor access and chemical-free pest control measures for livestock (Mie, Andersen, Gunnarsson, Kahl and Kesse-Guyot, 2017). Organic farming is a sustainable farming practice that guarantees food quality and safety in consideration of biodiversity, animal welfare and sustainable environment (Barański, Rempelos, Iversen and Leifert, 2017). Thus, organic product farmers produce organic foods. Organic products are produced using environmentally sustainable techniques and biodiversity, taking into cognisance animal welfare (Barański, Rempelos, Iversen and Leifert, 2017). In this study we define organic product as *those chemical free products produced without the use of GMOs and other adverse pesticides other than natural and biological farming techniques.* Organic products segments comprise food, medicine, cosmetics, etc. (Brantsæter, Ydersbond, Hoppin, Haugen, & Meltzer, 2017; Chen, 2009; Fonseca-Santos, Corrêa, & Chorilli, 2015). Some organic food products produced in Nigeria include local rice (Ofada), honey, black soap, native fowls, etc. (Mgbenka, Onwubuya, & Ezeano, 2015). Edibles easily deteriorate and perish, which sometimes result in humongous loss to firms. To avert or minimize this challenge, therefore, firms require an appropriate distribution strategy. This paper is of the opinion that such strategy, could be the one quickly and easily connects the potential and actual buyers to the producers of organic products.

Designing the right distribution strategy is key to achieving competitive advantage and distribution intensity could impact business performance in emerging markets (Chang and Tang, 2015; Kiran et al., 2012). Distribution, also, referred to as place, facilitates product consumption (Nelson & Consoli, 2010). An online store is a

place where a customer can conveniently purchase products or services through the Internet (Jusoh and Ling, 2012). This paper opines that optimum distribution intensity-focused firms should adopt online distribution strategies.

A plethora of studies have been conducted using online stores as a tool for massively distributing goods and services for optimum sales performance (Connolly et al., 1998; Dosen and Skare, 2004). In a study conducted by Khan et al (2015), the authors explored some perceived factors that affect customer satisfaction and repurchase intention in online stores in China. Similarly, studies on organic food distribution abound in literature (Baranski et al., 2017; Bransaeter, et al., 2017). However, these studies did not outline the measures by which online stores can be used to draw huge customers to organic food producers. This study, therefore, is joining in the conversation by investigating the extent to which online stores, as an intensive distribution strategy, can be used to elicit customer traffic among organic food producers in Port Harcourt. The question is: Do online stores help to enhance customer traffic, and hence, boost sales of organic product in Port Harcourt? One hypothesis is put forward to guide the study.

Literature Review

This study draws its theoretical foundation on the distribution channel theory. Distribution channel is a process that combines people and institutions for the transfer of title to a product and its movement from manufacturer to consumer (Ilesanmi, 2011). Distribution channel, otherwise called marketing channel, refers to all individuals, groups, organizations and institutions that move a product from point of production to point of consumption (Mulky, 2013). In this study, we define distribution channel as *a set of individuals, institutions and all route(s) or avenue through which products are made available to consumers by the producer for the purpose of exchange relations.* Distribution is the conduit that facilitates the production-consumption process; it refers to all logistics a company uses to deliver offerings to the right location, at the right time and at minimal costs (Yeboah et al., 2013).

Physical distribution performs the following utilities in marketing; form, time, place, etc. The focus of this study is anchored on place utility, and place describes the nearness of the product to the consumers. Convenience is the bedrock of online stores as it eliminates the challenges of physical distance. Online stores provide zero-distance because consumers do not need to cover any distance to purchase a product. Thus we are inclined to believe that online stores can influence sales, and hence the aim to investigate how online stores can be used to enhance sales performance in organic food firms in Port Harcourt.

Customer Traffic

Customer traffic is the level of incoming transactions in a store/ business outlet (Perdikaki, Kesavan, & Swaminathan, 2012). Abrishami et al. (2017) defined customer traffic as the number of buyers that access a retail store on daily basis. It also refers to the inflow of consumers to a retail store (Chuang, Oliva, & Perdikaki, 2016). The current study defines customer traffic as: *the number of customers or buyers that access a retail outlet- online and offline.*

Abrishami et al. (2017) conducted a study titled smart stores: a scalable foot traffic collection and prediction system, and customer traffic in that study was measured on the bases of web traffic rate, frequency of

in-store transactions captured in the sales record and other internal records of the firm. Feijo and Botelho (2012) examined the factors related to merchandising on retail sales and the outcome revealed that improved store's merchandise features such as display, pictures and posters with regards to products sold in the store attract high customer traffic and increased sales volume. In yet another scenario, Hodacova and Nemethova (2011) conducted a survey on the analysis of the influence of selected factors on website traffic where customer traffic was measured as frequency of online access to a product. Here customer traffic is measured as: store size expansion due to influx of customers; high level of queue at customer cash points; high rate of visit to the company's website by online users/customers. Customer traffic can be both online and offline (Baye, De los Santos, & Wildenbeest, 2016).

The level of store's traffic often times depends on location, composition and store accessibility (Jaravaza & Chitando, 2013). Consumers judge value based on the benefits, solutions and other add-on benefits which ultimately become the reason for brand preference, and increased customer traffic (Pujari, 2012). More so, Babakus (2004) established that perceived quality and customer satisfaction can lead to a resultant increase in the firm's customer traffic and revenue growth. Previous literature have proven that marketing performance can be measured by the number of new prospects, sales to new customers and customer loyalty (Gronholdt and Martensen, 2006).

More so, sales performance can equally be assessed by the degree of conversion of incoming transactions arising from customer foot traffic into actual sales (Perdikaki, Kesavan and Swaminathan, 2012). Use of devices and technology in tracking the frequency of customer foot traffic is one avenue through which organisations obtain accurate customer traffic data (Abrishami, Kumar and Nienaber, 2017).

Online Stores and Customer Traffic

In order to avoid entropy, organizations must be competitive to sell their products in the marketplace. Competitiveness is a yardstick in determining whether a company prospers, barely gets by, or fails (Stevenson, 2012). Business organizations compete through some combination of their marketing and operation functions. Marketing influences competitiveness in several ways, including identifying and producing, pricing, promoting and distributing products that satisfy consumer wants and needs.

In Marketing, intensive distribution describes the manufacturer attempts to get as many intermediaries of a particular type as possible to carry the product. Thus, intensive distribution strategy provides for increased sales volume, wider consumer recognition, and considerable impulse purchasing (Burnett 2008). The Internet presents the fastest growing form of intensive distribution that gives room for wider coverage both within and outside a firm's immediate local area (Dosen and Skare, 2004). Nowadays, the Internet is a viable tool for developing, pricing promoting and distributing a firm's brand (Yannopoulos, 2011). The Internet according to Fayaz and Azizinia (2016) is the newest effective marketing tool with unending opportunities for both small and large scale businesses to tap from. Several authorities suggest that the Internet can be an indispensable tool for effective product distribution in a digital arena (Yasmin, Tasneem, and Fatema, 2015;

Paquette, 2013; Connolly, Oslen, and Moore 1998).

Producers distribute their products through offline or online media. Offline media entails involving marketing intermediaries, such as agents, brokers, wholesalers, and retailers, while online media involves using electronic media such as television, radio, telephone, interactive multimedia/ electronic channels and computers.

Electronic channel is the use of the Internet to reach consumers quickly and conveniently (Yannopoulos, 2011). The wide use of electronic channel in businesses today is due to the fact that consumers see it as fast, convenient and reliable. Internet marketing is a modern business practice that involves the performance of marketing activities via online platforms such as the World Wide Web, e-mails, social media, etc. (El-Gohary, 2010). Online marketing activities may include website traffic analysis, monitoring the behaviour of online users and tracking incoming links on the cyber space (Jaravaza & Chitando, 2013). Some popular social media marketing networks that firms use to promote their businesses include Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn and Google.

The use of Internet has given prominence to the use of Social Media, Digital Media, Content Marketing, Online Stores and other media, in product distribution. Social media activates interactive relationship among members of a brand community (consumers with similar interest in a particular brand) who most times educate each other on the use and purchase information of a brand and influence online group buying behaviour (Paquette, 2013). Social media marketing is an important technique in digital marketing that companies use in distributing their messages to target audience without necessarily paying for the publishers or distributors as is the case for traditional marketing (Yasmin, Tasneem, and Fatema, 2015). The use of social media platform costs the firm less compared to other marketing platforms such as face-to-face sales or the use of marketing intermediaries such as middlemen or distributors. Social media campaigns present avenues for effective customer involvement and conversation thereby building customer trust and fostering genuine customer/ firm relations that is performance driven (Pradiptarini, 2011).

An Online store, which is the focus of this paper is an Electronic Store that allows for the shopping of goods and services any time with Internet application (Samsudin and Ahmad, 2014). Online shopping refers to the use of online stores also known as e-stores by consumers to make transactions and for logistics purposes (Khan, Liang and Shahzad, 2015; Monsuwe, Dellaert and Ruyter, 2004). Online store, according to Burinskiene and Daskevic (2014) affords consumers the opportunity of making purchase-sale deals directly with a producer by simply clicking the Web Site at their convenience. Online store benefits both the consumers and the marketers.

Online shopping gives consumer a feeling of enjoyment and satisfaction which translates into customer loyalty and positive customer relations with the business (Fayaz and Azizinia, 2016). Online stores guarantee convenience, and serve as motivation for online shoppers (Meixian, 2015). With Online store, consumers can afford to spend less time for shopping, and have some time to deploy to some other pressing endeavours (Jiang, et al 2013). Customers and online visitors access their products of choice on the Internet with minimum search

effort and search cost (Yannopoulos, 2011). Working demands long hours, thus, limited time is left for social activities, thereby, making consumers opt for shopping online (Fayaz and Azizinia, 2016). Marketers take advantage of the benefits of digital marketing to reach out to their customers and provide new and interesting ways to shop (Paquette, 2013). Online stores provide convenience, user-friendly websites, product specifics, information, warranty and product returns, etc. (Jiang, et al, 2013) and customer trust (Farah et al, 2018).

Shopping convenience is a prominent motivating force that drives customers to buy online (Jiang, et al 2013). Forsythe et al (2006) posit that shopping convenience emanates from the feeling that online users need not to leave the comfort of their homes to shop, enjoyment of privacy, and that shopping online saves consumers the cost of visiting the brick and mortar stores to make purchases. Asides convenience, other considerations motivate consumers to buy online ranging from cost-benefit comparison of products at different online stores at the same time and for the avoidance of pressure/ coercion associated with face-to-face interaction in offline buying process (Katawetawaraks, 2011). Most importantly, consumers consider accessibility and convenience among motivating factors for shopping online (Forsythe and Shi, 2003).

Since coverage is immense in intensive distribution policy, firms that seek wider reach in the ever congested online market use online stores to reach new prospects, generate sales from new accounts and elicit customer loyalty (Gronholdt and Martensen, 2006). Burinskiene and Daskevic (2014) posit that online stores present avenues for fundamentally new possibilities in the business terrain. Online stores have presented alternative avenues for effective

product differentiation and have led to the achievement of a near perfect economy where numerous competitors with similar brands interface to gain lasting customer loyalty and retention (Mpinganjira, 2014). Mulky (2013) demonstrated that online stores is a veritable distribution avenue for developed and emerging markets. Due to the rapid increase in penetration rate of the Internet, the business potential of online stores has drastically increased (Varnali, 2010). Digital marketing enables interaction with the audience, and create room for greater product involvement (Yasmin, Tasneem, and Fatema, 2015).

In marketing literature, a pool of studies have used indices such as fast/ speed, access to alternatives, convenience and less cost due to no transportation (Akinbode, Ekpudu, Ojo and Are, 2016), reduction in transaction time (Meixan, 2015) etc. as attributes of online stores in literature. Similarly, Jiang, et al (2013) categorized online convenience as online shopping convenience, search convenience, evaluation convenience, possession convenience and post-purchase convenience; meanwhile search convenience was further operationalized as level of web download speed and average number of items per product menu listing that consumers can find online. Adeiza et al. (2017) maintained that convenience is the bedrock of online shopping. Online stores has been variedly operationalized using such measures as convenience, user-friendly websites, product specifics, information, warranty and product returns, etc. (Jiang, et al, 2013) and customer trust (Farah et al, 2018).

Forsythe and Shi (2003) identified some drivers of online shopping to include information, convenience, no cost, etc. Meanwhile Khan et al (2015) have

demonstrated that customer satisfaction is key to achieving product repurchase in online stores. The rate of customer migration to the online world in recent time has given Internet marketing some degree of popularity and attention (Saha, 2015); this is due to a number of factors which include but not limited to convenience, customers' ability to get objective and subjective information, ease of access to online markets, interaction between/ among users, etc. (Svatosova, 2013).

It is pertinent to note that these factors majorly come to play when it comes to marketing an organic and fresh produce due to its perishable nature, hence the adoption of online stores as a useful tool to achieve high distribution intensity (Fayaz and Azizinia, 2016; Meixian, 2015; Katawetawaraks, 2011). Studies revealed that higher customer foot traffic can lead to product purchase, product consumption and sales performance (Abrishami, Kumar and Nienaber, 2017). Information on customer traffic in an outlet is ascertained using actual store traffic data to track sales performance level (Perdikaki, Kesavan and Swaminathan, 2012). Abrishami et al (2017) posit that data obtained at the store level can be channelled towards improving traditional staffing practices. Based on accurate customer foot predictions a firm can adjust the size of its contact employees, carry out stock forecast and sales forecast, and generally improve quality in retail stores and food chain.

Furthermore, there are indications that accurate customer foot traffic prediction can be used for the firm's forecast and planning ability, and that the more consumers are able to spare their time to move within and view products displayed on the shelves, the more likely it is for a sale to be initiated as well as impulse buying (Abrishami et al., 2017). Giving the

significance of online stores to organic product consumption, Zhang, Jansen, and Chowdhury (2011) in Paquette (2013) advised that firms should endeavour to create a brand presence on many different online media platforms so as to increase customer traffic both online and offline. This paper is concerned with the nexus between Online Store and Customer Traffic in Organic Food Industry. Based on the huge benefits of online stores to both consumers and marketers, we expect online stores to have positive relationship with customer traffic, hence, we hypothesize as follows:

H: There is a significant positive relationship between Online Stores and customer traffic in Organic Food Industry in Port-Harcourt.

Methodology

This correlational study adopted cross-sectional survey design, involved quantitative methodology, and was conducted in non-contrived environment. The target population comprised 40 organic food firms in Port Harcourt. Primary data were collected from four managers of each of these firms, using 160 copies of structured questionnaire. The validity of the measurement items were ascertained with a pilot study involving six professionals and six academia with marketing specialization.

The inputs of these experts were used to prepare the final draft of the questionnaire. The reliability of the research instruments were gauged using the Cronbach Alpha, and they were all found to be above the threshold of 0.7 Alpha, as suggested by Nunnaly, 1978. Pearson Product Moment Coefficient, r, was used to determine the correlation between online stores and customer traffic in the organic product industry in Port Harcourt. Further, simple regression method was used in the

data analyses with the aid of the SPSS version 25.0.

Analysis and Results

The study's hypothesis on the association of the online stores and customer traffic was tested and the result is stated in the table below.

H: There is a significant relationship between online stores and customer Traffic among organic food producers in Port Harcourt.

Table 4.1: Regression Analysis of the Relationship between Online stores and Customer Traffic: Model summary

Model	R	R^2	Adjusted R^2	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.975[a]	.951	.951	1.231

    a.   Predictor: (Constant), ONLINE STORES
    b.   Dependent Variable: CUSTOMER TRAFFIC

Source: Research Data, September – November, 2019, SPSS Outputs on Stepwise Regression Analysis.

From the outcome of the regression analysis as shown in the above regression table, R^2= 0.951 is an indication that online stores predicted 95.1% customer traffic in organic food firms in Port Harcourt.

Table 4.2:   Regression Analysis of the Relationship between Online Stores and Customer Traffic: ANOVA

Model		Sum of squares	Df	Means Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	4686.378	1	4686.378	3090.393	.000[b]
	Residual	239.597	158	1.516		
	Total	4925.975	159			

    a.   Predictor: (Constant), ONLINE STORES
    b.   Dependent Variable: CUSTOMER TRAFFIC

Source: Research Data, September – November, 2019, SPSS outputs on Stepwise Regression Analysis.

Above is the ANOVA table revealing that the sum of squares of the regression = 4686.378 out of a total of 4925.975 (i.e. 4686.378/4925.975 x 100= 95.1%). This implies that the study could account for 95.1% variation in customer traffic as a result of the introduction of online stores in the studied firms with an insignificant residual of 4% which is the value that could not be accounted for in this study. Also, the p-value of 0.000 revealed that the relationship between the studied variables is significant   (2-tailed).

Table 4.3: Regression Analysis of the Relationship between Online stores and Customer Traffic: COEFFICIENTS

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	T	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	3.450	.376		9.188	.000
	ONLINE STORES	.770	.014	.975	55.591	.000

    a.   Dependent Variable: CUSTOMER TRAFFIC

Source: Research Data, September – November, 2019, SPSS Outputs on Stepwise Regression Analysis.

The study's regression coefficient table presents the t-statistics and p-values having tested the significance of the intercept of online stores on customer traffic in our regression model as follows:

Customer Traffic = β_0 + βos + ε

The null hypothesis in this study can be stated as βos = 0, while the alternate hypothesis was tested, that β Online stores ≠ 0.

From the above coefficient table, we generate the Customer Traffic model thus;

Customer Traffic= 3.45 +0.770$_{OS}$

Customer Traffic = 4.22

This implies that establishing an additional online store by organic food firms in Port Harcourt will attract between 4 to 5 new customers to the firm, thereby enhancing sales performance. N the ANOVA Table 4.2, the F-statistic is 3090.393, which is far greater than 0.01, with a significant level of 0.000, which is less than 0.01. These indicate that the regression model produced in this study will be very useful, and highly significant in predicting customer traffic among organic product firms in Port Harcourt. The **t**-value is 55.591, which is greater than $\alpha/2$, that is, 0.01/2 = 0.005, two-tailed, with a significant level, **p**, of 0.000, which is less than 0. 01 and 0.05 levels of significance. Therefore, we fail to accept the null hypothesis, but accept the directional hypothesis. In other words, **β**, the coefficient of online stores in the population, is not zero. It is either greater than or less than zero. Also, **t**-value = 55.591, with a significant level, **p**, = 0.000, which means that if this study is conducted on the organic products firms operating in Port Harcourt a hundred times, the value of **t** would always be as big as 55.591, those 100 times.

From the above we have ample statistical evidence to uphold the alternate hypothesis thus:

H: There is a significant positive relationship between Online Stores and customer traffic in Organic Food Industry in Port-Harcourt.

The above finding is in agreement with Khan et al (2015) which revealed that consumers are increasingly patronising online stores due to its perceived benefits. Also, Yannopoulos (2011) supports the outcome of this study and posited that reduction in search cost and search effort has led to increased popularity in the use of online stores. Furthermore, Babakus (2004) agrees with the study's findings that firms constantly strive to keep their customers satisfied for increased store traffic.

Conclusion and Recommendation

Giving the outcome of the finding and the discussion, we conclude that Online Stores influence customer traffic in organic food firms in Port Harcourt. Online Stores provide easier and faster means by which customers can buy organic products in Port Harcourt.

Based on this, we therefore, recommend that organic firms in Port Harcourt aiming at maximizing their sales potentials, need to put online stores in place, which would increase customer traffic, and by extension, sales volume.

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