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The Effect of Brand Differentiations on Firms Competitive Advantage

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Abstract
In recent years the concept of competitive advantage has taken centre stage in discussions of business strategy; therefore, the main objective of' the study was to examine the effect of the brand differentiation of on a firm 's competitive advantage, The study also contains the review of the related literature as studied by various scholars on the related topic. The study was carried out in Kano metropolist. Hence the primary method of data collection was use for this research through the administration of questionnaire. The primary data was measured using regression analysis. from the of analysis it is recommended that there is link between brand differentiation and a firm competitive advantage in the sense that the brand differentiation has significantly on a firm competitive advantage and there is also link between brand differentiation and customer loyalty in sense that the differentiation has significant influence on customer loyally. The study concludes that judging from the various computations of analysis and findings, result revealed some pertinent fact from which the researcher then drew certain conclusions. Different brand differentiation is being adopted by firms andtheir marketers to make their various brands acceptable, but more aggressive marketing devices need to be adopted by those concerned with manufacturing and marketing of this product so as to meet the ever-changing buying motives and pattern of the consumer. Finally, in developing marketing strategy for Dangote product in Kano metropolis, the study was recommended that the relative element of brand element of brand different should blended to reflect the importance attached having maximum competitive advantage. While for Dangote brand to be more successful in achieving customers loyalty, the study recommended that it should out performs other brands quality whiles in the market.

Keyword: *Competative advantage, customer loyalty, brand differentiation, strategy*

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I. Introduction

Branding is a crucial component in marketing that determines the success of an organization. It is everything that an organisation does to create in the minds of customers and prospects the perception that there is no product or service on the market that is quite like the firm's (Moore, Stone, & Briggs. 2009). The purpose of this is not only to win customers but to retain them. Developing a successful brand to gain competitive advantage is essentially a marketing problem in industries that requires a marketing thought and marketing approach. Itenables a focus on how best a product or company can develop an edge and become superior to their competitors.

Porter (2008), argument can be achieved by creating one or more valuecreating activities in a way that creates more overall value than competitors do.

A brand is a name, term, logo, sign, symbol, design, or a combination of these; created to identify the goods or services of one seller or group of sellers and differentiate them from those of competitors (Kotler & Pfoersch, 2006). However, the current brand conceptualization is far more complex. Most academics agree that it now entails more than a logo or an advertising theme. For example, Yap (2006), consented that a brand is not just a product, logo or trademark, nor is it only about advertisement or tagline. These are only the means to an end, the end being the establishment of a competitive brand. Brands identify the enterprise or company and the source of all its goods and services. The brand stands for something specific: It is the corporate personnel that conveys value, creates trust, and delivers assurances of a consistent quality and service leading to repeat purchase and loyalty from customers, users, and the world at large. Brands are assets constitutive of intellectual capital value, significant drivers and creators of market capitalization, reputation and public integrity (Bradford, 2009). Moore et al (2009), suggested that brand otherwise represents many more intangible aspects of a product or service; it embodies the collection of feelings and perceptions about quality, image, lifestyle and status. The power of a brand lies in itsabilityto command a good reputation, goodwill and the best memorable position in the mind of theproposed consumer (Khan, 2005).

Standing out amidst a massive chorus of competitors is a challenge for any company intoday's business climate. Kotler & Pfoersch (2006), elaborated that brands facilitate theidentification of products, services and businesses as well as differentiate them from thecompetition. They further contended that they are effective means to communicate the value and benefits a product can provide. A brand which is widely known in the market place acquires recognition and effect confidence in customer relationship. The importance ofbranding cannot be overemphasized with the constant technological discoveries. Brandinghas become the language for almost every savvy marketer, marketing gurus and researchers.It has even permeated the walls of nonprofit organisations as they seek to optimize their goal it is therefore, of no wonder that there have been many researches done on it leading to the discovery of its role and importance in the business world today (ShifTman & Kanuk, 2009). Corporate branding is established when the organisation brands the company's name and subsequently brand all the company's product under the umbrella of the organization. Corporate branding helps to convey the vision, mission, values and intention of the organisation. It leads to cost effectiveness as it uplifts the entire brand of brands of the company (Charkraborty, 2010). Corporate branding builds on the tradition of product branding, seeking to create differentiation and preference. However, corporate branding is conducted at the level of the firm instead of the product or service, and till there more extends its reach beyond customers to stakeholders such as employees, customers, investors, suppliers, partners, regulators and local communities (Hatch & Schultz, 2001). A corporate brand is not necessarily limited to a single corporation. It can also apply to a variety of corporate entities, such as corporations, their subsidiaries, and groups of companies (Balmer & Gray, 2003). Balmer & Gray (2003), again assert that corporate identity, as an important corporate asset, represents the firm's ethics, goals and values, to differentiate the firm from its competitors.

Kotler & Armstrong (2008), emphasized that carefully developed and managed brands are powerful assets that equip the company with power and value in the marketplace. While agreeing with this proposition, research has not been conducted in the area so that less competitive flour producing firms can learn competitive strategies such as branding. A study on the branding strategy of well established companies can provide lessons for the smaller flour producing firms to gradually gain competitive advantage.

Nowadays most brands, regardless of industry, are deficient at developing various differentiation strategies. In the context of a brand, these differentiation strategies should add gist andconnotation. But a meaningful differentiation strategy should be more than creatingpoints of difference from competitors and providing consumers reasons to believe these points of difference. A successful differentiation strategy requires a brand to emphasize onuniqueness. In reality most brands pursue commoditization by adding new features to their products. In this context, competitivedifferentiation has become increasingly important. For example, brands like Starbucks or Nike tend to have a strong cultural relevance for consumers. However, successoor these brands is the result of sustained efforts to create, shape and sustain the cultural debate rather than a strategy of embracing the cultural trend. Brands frequently promise consumers more services, better products and more benefits. As a consequence, consumers tend to have more choice possibilities, but less time to make those choices. From a marketing standpoint, differentiation results by offering consumers a value that surpasses their expectations, In order to meet consumer expectations, in practice brands frequently create various brand extensions. A brand extension implies that a firm uses analready established brand name to introduce new products (Claudiu-CataIin, 2015).

1.2 Statement of the Problem

A wide variety of brands that are similar in performance can make a company to find its brand in a difficult position in the market place. For companies, differentiation is seen as a major method of gaining competitive advantage over competitors.

Developing a successful brand to gain competitive advantage is essentially a marketing problem in industries that requires a marketing thought and marketing approach. In an organisation whereby brand differentiation is not put into consideration, the outcome is that; the aims and objectives of the organisation to achieve competitive advantage would not be as desired. Also in the case whereby adequate brand differentiation is not utilized, this results in low competitive advantage because the consumer would prefer other brands to the organisation. The purpose of the study was to examine the effect of brand differentiation of on a firm's competitive advantage.

1.3 Objectives of the Study

The main objective of the study was to examine the effect of brand differentiation of on a firm's competitive advantage. The specific objectives are to:

i. Examine the effect of brand differentiation on firm's competitive advantage.
ii. Determine whether brand differentiation has influence over customer loyalty.

1.4 Research Questions

i. Does brand differentiation have effect on firm's competitive advantage?
ii. To what extent does brand differentiation influence customer loyalty?

1.5 Hypotheses of the study

Hypothesis one

H_0 Brand differentiation has no effect on form’s competitive advantage.
H_1 Brand differentiation has effect of firm’s competitive advantage

Hypothesis Two

H_0Brand differentiation has no influence on customer loyalty.
H_1Brand differentiation has influence on customer loyalty.

II. Review Of Related Literature

2.1 Conceptual Review

2.1.2 Concept of Brand

The word "brand" is derived from the old Norse "brand" meaning "to burn"**-** recalling the practice of producers burning their mark (or brand) onto their products. A brand is a name, term, sign, symbol, design or a combination of these, which is used to identify the goods or services of one seller and to differentiate them from those of competitors. Powerful brand name have consumer franchise that is, they command strong consumer loyalty. This meansthat a sufficient number of customers demand these brands and refuse substitutes, even if the substitutes are offered atsomewhat lower prices (Kotler & Armstrong, 2001). Brand serves as a pivotal role for distinguishing goods and services from those of the competitors (Keller, 2008). The word "brand"is often used as a metonym refusing to the company that is strongly identified with a brand (Kotler & Armstrong, 2001).

In accounting, a brand is defined as an intangible asset, is often the most valuable asset on a corporation's balance sheet (Sounders, Wong, Kotler & Armstrong, 2001). Brand owners manage their brands carefully to create shareholder value, and brand valuation is an importantmanagement technique that ascribes a money value to a brand, and allows marketing investment to manage. Kotler & Arinstrong (2001), posit that brand can deliver up to four levels ofmeaning:

i. **Attributes**: A brand first brings to mind certain product attributes. For example, Mercedes suggests such attributes as "well engineered, well built, durable, high prestige, fast, expensive and high resale value". The company may use one or more of these attributes in its advertising for the car. For years, Mercedes advertised "Engineered like no other car in the world". This provides a positioning platform for other attributes of the car.

ii. Benefits: Customers do not buy attributes, they buy benefits. Therefore, attributes must be translated into functional and emotional benefits. For example, the attributes "durable" could translate into functional benefit, "I won't have to buy a new car every few years". The attributeexpensive might translate into the emotional benefits. "The car makes me feel important and admired". The attribute "well built" might translate into functional and emotional benefit, "I am safe into the event of an accident".

iii. Values: A brand also says something about the buyers' values. Thus Mercedes buyers value high performance, safety and prestige. A brand marketer must identify the specific groups of car buyers whose value coincide with the delivered benefit package.

iv. Personality: A brand also projects a personality. Motivation researchers sometimes ask 'If this brand were a person, what kind of person would it be?' Consumers might visualize aMercedes automobile as being a wealthy, middle-aged business executive. The brand will attract people whose actual or desired self-images match the brand's image.

All these suggest that a brand is a complex symbol. If a company treats a brand only as a name, it misses the point of branding. The challenge of branding is to develop a deep set of meaning or associations for the brand (Keller, 2008).

Given the four level of a brand's meaning, marketers must decide the level at which they will build the brand's identity. It would be a mistake to promote only the brand's attributes. Remember, buyers are interested not so much in brand attributes as in brand benefits. Moreover, competitors can easily copy attributes. Or the current attributes may later become less valuable to consumers, hurting a brand that is tied too strongly to specific attributes. Even promoting the brand on one or more of its benefits can be risky. Suppose Mercedes touts its main benefits as 'high performance'. If several competing brands emerge with as high or higher performance, or if car buyers begin placing less importance on performance as compared to other benefits, Mercedes will need the freedom to move into new benefits positioning (kotler & Armstrong, 2001

Types of Brand

The type of brand you choose can help guide your business decisions, and should beincorporated into your overall business planning. Keep in mind that different types of brands suit different products and services, and will appeal to different customers. Brands may be concept brands, designed to support and promote an idea, or commodity brands, which are associated with a product or service (Boateng & Coretta, 2013).

According to American Marketing Association (201 1), the following are the few examples of the many types of brands.

i. Attitude brands: Attitude branding is based on the feeling rather than the physical characteristics, of a product. The product may be promoted as making people feel free, energetic or powerful. This is commonly used for soft drink and sportswear.

ii. Symbolic brands: This is similar to attitude branding and it is often used for services, such as banks and phone companies. Symbolic branding uses the emotional aspects of a service, such as sense of security, to attract and retain customers,

iii. Functional brands: In some cases, the functional or physical characteristics of a product or service are more powerful than the emotional aspects. Functional branding promotes the reasons why someone should buy a product or service. These could be that it is unique or that it offers a better price or performs better than other products in the market.

iv. Individual brands: Somebusinesses choose to give each of their products or service a separate brand. These can sometime compete against each other, such as with different flavours of soft drinks that are produced by the same company. Individual branding can also be used to keepdifferent parts of a business separate, particularly if they span a number of areas, such as inbusiness that sells food as well as clothing. Some companies also create new brands of the same product. They launch both products in apparent competition so that they can gain extra market share. This is usually done by large companies, and is risky if the new brand takes business away from the one that the business is built around.

v. Own brands: This is sometimes referred to as private labels or store brands. They are brands that carry the retailer's name. These are commonly used by large supermarket chains. Smaller businesses may also use their own brands. For example, a beautician may also have their own line of beauty products that they use and sell

vi. Manufacturer brands: These types of brands are created by producer and bear their chosen brand name. The producer is responsible for marketing the brand. The brand is owned by the producer, By building their brand names, manufacturers can gain widespread distribution (for exampleby retailers who want to sell the brand) and build customer loyalty; think about the manufacturer brands that you feel loyal to (Boateng & Coretta, 2013),

2.1.3 Concept of Differentiation

Beyond deciding which segments of the market it will target, the company must decide on a value proposition- on how it will create differentiated value for targeted segments and what positions it wants to occupy in those segments.

According to Kotler & Gary Armstrong (2008), differentiation involves actually differentiating the firm's product to create superior customer value. To be branded productsmust be differentiated and at one extreme we find products that allow little variation; steel, noodles and air-conditioners. Yet, even here some form of differentiation is possible; indomie and Golden Penny etc. At theother extreme are products capable of high differentiation such as mobile phones, electronics and automobiles, here, the seller faces an abundance of design parameters, including form, features, performance quality, conformancequality, durability, reliability and reparability style. The obvious means of differentiation and often the most compelling ones to consumers relate to the aspect of product and service.

2.1.4 Dimensions of Differentiation

According to Kotler & Armstrong (2006), some dimensions a company can use to differentiate its brand are personnel, channel and image.

a. Product Differentiation: brands can be differentiated on the basis of a number of different product or service dimensions, such as product form, features, performance, conformance, durability, reliability, reparability, style and design as well as such service dimensions as ordering ease, delivery, installation, customer training, customer consulting, and maintenanceand repair. Apart from all these, one more for brands is as "best quality". The strategic planning institute studied the impact of higher relative product quality and found a significantly positive correlation between relative product quality and return on investment (ROI). High quality business units earned more because premium quality allowed them to charge more; they benefitted from more repeat purchase, consumer loyalty and positive word of mouth; and the cost of delivering more quality were not much higher than for business units producing low quality. Quality depends on actual product performance but it is also communicated by choosing physical cues and signs such as, a car manufacturer makes sure its car doors make solid sound when slammed shut because some buyers in the showroom slam the door shut to test the cars' built. Quality is alsocommunicated through other marketing elements. A high price usually signals premium quality, quality image is also affected by packaging, distribution, advertising and promotion, a manufacturer's reputation also contributes to the perception of quality.

b. Personnel Differentiation: companies can gain a strong competitive advantage through having better trained people. Better trained personnel exhibit six characteristics; competence, courtesy, credibility, reliability and communication. IBM enjoys excellent reputation because the people there are professionals.

Channel Differentiation: firms that practice channel differentiation gain competitive advantage through the way they design their channel's coverage, expertise and performance. Caterpillar's success in the construction equipment industry is based on superior channel development. It dealers are renowned tbr their first rate services.

Image Differentiation: Buyers response to company or brand irnages ditTers. Companies must work hard to develop distinctive images for their brands. Identity and images needs to be distinguished. Identity is the way a company aims to identify or position itself or its product. Image is the way the public perceives the company or its products. An effective identityestablishes the product's character and value proposition, conveys this character in a distinctive way and delivers emotional power beyond a mental image. This image must be supported by everything the company says and does.

2.1.5 Promoting Differentiation

According to Kotler & Arnnstrong (2006), after a company has discovered several potential differentiations that provide competitive advantages, it must now choose the ones on which it will build its positioning strategy. It must decide how many difference to promote and whichones.

How Many Differences to Promote: Rosser Reeves said a company should develop a unique selling proposition (USP) for each brand and stick to it. Each brand should pick an attribute and tout itself as "number one" on that chosen attribute because buyers tend to remember number one better especially in this over communicated society. Other marketers think that companies should position themselves on more than one differentiator which may be necessary in a situation where two or more firms are claiming to be best on the same attribute. However, as companies increase the number of claims for their brands, they risk disbelief and loss of clear positioning.

Which Differences to Promote: not all brand differences are worthwhile or meaningful. Each difference has the potential to create company costs as well as customer benefits. A difference is worth promoting if it is important, distinctive, superior, communicable, pre-emptive, affordable and profitable. Thus, choosing competitive advantages upon which to position a product or service can be difficult, yet such choices may be crucial to success.

2.2.7 Competitive Advantage

Barney (2002) says that "a firm experiences competitive advantages when its actions in an industry or market create economic value and when few competing firms are engaging in similar actions." Besanko, Dranove, and Shanley (2000) says "when a firm earns a higher rate of economic

profit than the average rate of economic profit of other firms competing within the same market, the firm has a competitive advantage in that market." Saloner, Shepard and Podolny (2001) say that "most törnns of competitive advantage mean either that a firm can produce some service or product that its customers value than those produced by competitors or that it can produce its service or product at a lower cost than its competitors.”

Competitive advantage depended on where the business was located and where it chose to provide services. Stable environments allowed this strategy to be successful, particularly for large and dominant organisations in mature industries. The ability to develop a sustained competitive advantage today is increasingly rare. A competitive advantage laboriously achieved can be quickly lost. Organisations sustain a competitive advantage only so long as the services they deliver and the manner in which they deliver them have attributes that correspond to the key buying criteria of a substantial number of customers. Sustained competitive advantage is the result of an enduring value differential between the products or services of one organisation and those of its competitors in the minds of customers.

Therefore, organisations must consider more than the fit between the external environmentand their present internal characteristics. They must anticipate what the rapidly changingenvironment will be like, and change their structures, cultures, and other relevant factors so as to reap the benefits of changing times. Sustained competitive advantage has become more of a matter of movement and ability to change than of location or position (Dirisu, Oluwole, &lbidunni 2013). Competitive advantage is at the heart of firm's performance. It is concerned with the interplay between the types of competitive advantage, i.e., cost, and differentiation, and the scope of the firm's activities.

2.2.7 Sources of competitive advantage

Competitive advantage is an advantage over competitors gained by offering consumers greater value, either by means of lower prices or by providing products that gives the consumer greater benefits and services that justifies a higher price (Ekmekqi 2010). The notion of creating value provides insight into the sources of competitive advantage. Value creation has three aspects: the benefits received by customers, the costs incurred by the company and its suppliers, and the particular combination of customers and suppliers. Since the total value created by the firm also equals customer willingness to pay minus the costs of using the firm's assets and the costsincurred by suppliers, achieving a competitive advantage means that the firm must either increase customer benefits, lower supplier costs, or discover innovative transactions. Accordingly, there are three sources of competitive advantage:

l. Cost efficiencies that make more efficient use of the firm's assets and supplier inputs or that lower supplier cost;

2. Product differentiation to raise customer benefits; and

3. Transaction innovations that lower the costs of transactions or that create new combinations of customers and suppliers.

Porter is of the opinion that a firm being able to produce a product/service at a lower cost compared to the competitors is one-way to competitive advantage. This is often achieved by large-scale organisations that develop efficiency because of their repetitive experience of the tasks involved or using their power to leverage lower costs. The other two sources of competitive advantage stems from the value seen by customers who either see specific attractive elements in the offering (differentiation) or feel that all their needs are being met in the best way by that competitor's offering (focus) (Henderson, 2011). It is important that customers always perceive a consistent difference between a firms products/services and that of its competitors as competitive advantage is only meaningful when it relates to an attribute valued by the market. Other sources of Competitive advantage can be broken down into distinct building blocks.

1. Market Responsiveness: Your Company is able to respond to consumer demands quickly, or even anticipate their needs. H&M is the second largest clothing retailer in the world, and they bring designs from the runway to its stores with remarkable speed.

2. Product or Service Superiority: Your products and services are definitively better than the competition. Your company sets the standard of quality in its industry.

3. Production Efficiency: Your Company is a well-oiled machine. It invests in production, distribution, and total quality management.

4. Natural or Human Resources: A natural advantage could be a prime retail location. A human resource advantage might be a celebrity CEO or an irreplaceable member of yourteam. Apple had Steve Jobs, for instance.

5. Market Dominance: Being #1 or #2 in a category is a competitive advantage. Unseating brands like Coca-Cola or McDonalds would take Herculean effort, and even that may not beenough. Size provides credibility, but also forces competitors to invest disproportionately more in sales and marketing to get similar levels of brand awareness.

6. Short Term Profit: Cash in the bank gives your company options. You may not be able tocount on a surge in profits forever, but if you can capture it, take it.

7. Method of Sale: Dell transformed the PC industry by cutting out the middlemen. It invested in direct sales channels to increase consumer preference and undercut its competitors with lower prices. Innovations in sales techniques can open up new markets while cutting costs.

8. Distribution Methods: Distribution is your company's ability to get products to yourcustomers. One of Apple's core advantages IS its supply chain. Tesla skipped the need for expensive dealerships, and opened showrooms in malls.

9.Technological Advantage: Netflix and Amazon know what you like. Their data scientists have developed remarkable algorithms to give you the content and products you want whenyou want it, Technological advantage can take many forms, but it's fundamentally the application of software, hardware, and other intellectual property to improve the efficiency, effectiveness, or reach of the business.

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Customer Loyalty

Another source of competitive advantage is Customer Loyalty. In marketing, customer loyalty is often associated with a brand. Conceptually, a brand is a name, term, sign, symbolor design, or a combination of these, intended to identify and differentiate the goods or services of one seller from those of competitors. Operationally, a brand conveys its identityname or fame that embodies a specific set of unique features, benefits and services to thebuyers. Currently, brand building is a major marketing cost and undertaking to attractcustomer loyalty. Brand loyalty gives sellers some protection from competition and greater control in planning marketing programs (Kotler, 2003).

According to Oliver (1999), brand loyalty is a deeply held commitment to re-buy or re-patronize a preferred product/service consistently in the future, thereby, causing repetitive same brand set purchasing, despite situational influences and marketing efforts having thepotential to cause switching behavior, This definition helps us to distinguish loyalty asbehavioral, attitudinal and situational (Holbrook, 2001; Uncles, Dowling and Flatmnond,2003). Behavioral loyalty is mainly expressed in terms of revealed purchase and usagebehavior, often conditioned on customer satisfaction, and is measured by historical purchasing of one's brand and competing brands (this is divided loyalty or polygamous behavior). Attitudinal loyalty is often expressed as an ongoing relationship to a brand, often conditioned on positive customer preferences towards the brand, and is strongly influenced by significant others (this is strong loyalty or monogamous behavior). Lastly, situational loyalty is often expressed as a contingent relationship to the brand (e.g. I will buy it if it is available, or if it is on sale) that is often determined by the shopping and purchasing situation (weak loyalty or promiscuous behavior).

All three types of loyalty are important, even though the first two are more critical for long term sales and market share. In the face of tough competition, having brand loyal customers not only ensure sales, but also significantly reduce marketing costs. In this paper, we include bothbehavioral and attitudinal aspects of loyalty.

Social Media

Social media is vital for customer service today. While many people will not go to the effort to write a letter of complaint, email and (more recently) social media platforms have made the process of interacting with businesses more accessible. Its not just about complaints, social can also mean you are always available to help your customers out.

Trust

Become the expert in your own field, and your target audience will trust your opinion. If you can express your expertise in the media or through your own social channels and offer useful information, then it will only help drive sales, interest and brand awareness.

Discount and Special Offers

It may seem obvious, but discounts and special offer still seem to hold a lot of clout among consumers and was cited as the top reason in the survey for brand loyalty. Customers will stay loyal for many reasons, but if you can reward them in the kind for their loyalty, you are not only providing a good experience them but developing a mutually beneficial relationship for both parties as well. If customers feel valued and are getting a fair deal from their loyalty, then they have no reason to go anywhere else.

Customer Services

The key to loyalty is customer's service. Every customer is just as important as the last. Remember that while internet communication is more removed than face-to-face interaction, Its still word of mouth that drives all of these different platforms. If you treat all of your customers with respect and honesty, then they will respect you back.

Celebrity

According to the Microsoft Student Encarta Dictionary (2009), Celebrity is somebody who is famous during his or her own lifetime. Therefore, Celebrity Advertisement is the use of celebrities in the display of products in adverts.

2.3 Theoretical Review

The Resource-Based View Theory

The resource based theory view (RBV) is a managerial framework used to determine the strategic resources with the potential to deliver comparative advantage to a firm. Theseresources can be exploited by the firm in order to achieve sustainable competitive advantage.

Barney's 1991 article "Firm Resources and sustained competitive advantage", is widely cited as a pivotal work in the emergence of the resource-based view. However, some scholars argue that there was evidence for a fragmentary resource-based theory from the 1930s.

Resource-based theory proposes that firms are heterogeneous because they possessheterogeneous resources, meaning firms can have different strategies because they have different resources mixes. 'The Resource-based theory focuses managerial attention on the firm's internal resources in an effort to identity those assets, capabilities and competencies with the potential to deliver superior competitive advantage.

Porter's Theory of Competitive Advantage

The theory of the competitive advantage starts from the principle that the only important concept at the national level is the national productivity (FotaConstantin, 2004). In the elaboration of his theory, Porter starts from the following premises (Porter Michael, 1990)

- the nature of the competition and the sources of competitive advantage are very different among industries and even among the segments of the same industry, and a certaincountry can influence the obtaining of the competitive advantage within a certain sector of industry;

- the globalisation of the competition and the appearance 01 the trans-national companies do not eliminate the influence of a certain country for getting the competitiveadvantage ; a country can offer different competitive advantages for a company, depending if it is an origin country or a host country;
- the competitiveness has a dynamic character (Schumpeter); the innovations have a role of leading force in this permanent change and determine the companies to invest onorder not to be eliminated from the market (Negriloiu 1997 Starting from these premises, Porter identifies a system of determinants which is the basis for getting competitive advantages by the nations.

The theory adopted for this study was the resource-based view theory. This is because the theory focuses managerial attention on the firm's internal resources in an effort to identify those assets, capabilities and competencies with the potential to deliver superior competitive advantage.

2.4 Empirical review

Felicia, (2016) conducted a research on the topic "Brand Building for Competitive Advantage in the Ghanaian Jewelry Industry". The objective of this paper was to study the branding strategies of precious minerals marketing corporation (PMMC) and ERNIE'S classic jewelry and how that influences their competitive advantage. Primary data were obtained frommanagement and customers of these two companies through interviews and questionnaires. Descriptive statistics were used in the analysis of the survey' data. The results indicate that research and development, internal branding, brand positioning/promotion and customer orientation are the critical branding factors for competitive advantage adopted by the firms. However, PMMC was found to be more competitive compared to ERNIE'S classic jewelry through brand building.

Kireru, Ombui, andOmwenga(2016), conducted a study on"lnfluence of Product Differentiation Strategy in Achieving Competitive Advantage in Commercial Banks: A Case of Equity Bank Limited". This study portrays that product differentiation is achieved by offering a valued variation of the physical product. Commercial banks in Kenya have come torealize that in order to provide value and win customers, there is a need to quickly and accurately identify changes in customer needs, design and develop more complex products which would satisfy those needs, provide higher levels of customer support and service.

Equity Bank Limited has engaged in product designing and development. The study sought to fill the existing knowledge gap by establish influence of product differentiation strategies in achieving competitive advantage in Equity Bank Limited. The objective of the study was to determine influence of product differentiation strategies in achieving competitive advantage in commercial banks in Kenya. This research adopted a descriptive survey research design. The target population of this study was 200 supervisor staff working at Equity Headquarter, Nairobi. The study adopted stratified sampling which was used to select the sample size of 100 respondents. The study used a semi structured questionnaire to collect primary data. The questionnaire was made of mixture of close and open ended items. Descriptive statistics such as means, standard deviation and frequency distribution were used to analyze the data. Data presentation was done by the use of pie charts, bar charts and graphs, and frequency tables to ease understanding and interpretation of the data. Qualitative data, which was mainly gathered from open ended questions. The study was consolidated, interpreted and then analyzed through content analysis. Regression analysis helped the study establish the statistical significance of influence of product differentiation in achieving competitive advantage in commercial banks. Regression analysis helped the study establish the statistical significance of influence of product differentiation in achieving competitive advantage in commercial banks. From the findings, there has been a product process differentiation in the bank where observable characteristics of a product or service that are relevant to customers' preferences and choice processes are met. These include size, shape, color, weight, design, material, and technology. The study concluded that financial institutions adopt product differentiation strategies to deliver best deposits pack at the best prices to the customers. Thestudy concluded that for long-term profits in the banks is influenced by the continuously giving customers the products to their satisfaction and the creation and optimization of process goes beyond tools and practices.

Kilonzo, (2012) conducted a study on "Brand Positioning Strategies and Competitive Advantage of the Five Star Hotels in Nairobi. This study focused on the brand positioningStrategies adopted by five star hotels in Nairobi and the relationship between brand positioning strategies and competitive advantage achieved by five star hotels in Nairobi.

Among the findings, it was observed that application of various brand positioning strategies was above average with quality positioning and problem/solution positioning being the most applied strategies. On the other hand, the hotel industry is viewed not to prioritize rivalry-based positioning and benefit-driven positioning types of brand positioning. Competitive advantage of various brand positioning strategies was above average, where the respondents agreed with the fact that increased clientele loyalty was the greatest competitive advantage from brand positioning strategies. On the other hand, the hotel industry did not gain a big competitive advantage of more inelastic customer response to price increase these was as aresult of price insensitivity in the industry.

Davcikand Sharma, (2013) conducted a study on "Impact of Product Differentiation, Marketing Investments and Brand Equity on Pricing Strategies: A Brand Level Investigation". The paper used an aggregate data set for 735 fast moving consumer goods (FMCG) brands from Nielsen (10,282 households) to explore the combined influence of brand equity, marketing investment and product on differences in pricing among small an Medium enterprises (SME), multinational companies (MNC) and retailers (private labels). Using a cluster analysis, it is shown that premium price is positively associated with -innovation company type. Managerial implications of the findings are discussed along with future research directions,

Hem and Tcslo, (2012) researched on the topic "Brand Positioning Strategies: An Experimental Test of Two Types of Benefit Differentiation". The goes thus;" The purpose of this study is to examine associative- and instrumental benefit differentiation based on secondary associations as part of brand positioning. The field of brand positioning has beensubject to extensive research, however, differentiation based on secondary associations and differences between instrumental and associative benefit differentiation has received less attention. Instrumental benefit differentiation relate to benefits that are linked directly to product performance, while associative benefit differentiation relates to indirect benefits that evoke associations of consumption contexts, feelings, and emotions. We look at how the differentiation strategies vary in effectiveness with regard to creating positive brand attitude and their ability to generate benefit associations. We conducted a classical experiment on a convenience sample (N 294) by utilizing six questionnaires to collect our data. Our research reveals that associative- and instrumental benefit differentiation does not differ in their positive effect on brand attitude, and that the associative strategy generates more benefitassociations than the instrumental strategy. The results thus contradict the fundamental viewof unique selling propositions and imply that brands could successfully achieve positive brand attitude with both differentiation strategies. Further, an associative benefit differentiation strategy should lead to a richer, more positive, and more sustainable networkof associations. We failed to detect that the number of benefit associations positively mediates the effect of differentiation strategy on brand attitude. This could imply that one exposure is not sufficient in order to reveal such a relationship.

Dirisu, Oluwole and Ibidunni (2013), in their work "product differentiation: competitive advantage and optimal organizational performance (a tool study ofunilevernigeriaplc)" aimed at determining the extent to which higher product quality relate with the sales growth of an organisation concluded that even though there is little significance product differentiation holds in relation with organisational performance, the fact remains that there is a positive relationship between the variables. This means that manufacturing organizations must pay greater attention to the products the manufacture in terms of quality 'design, innovations and unique features. Their research study further demonstrates that product differentiation could be used as a tool for achieving competitive advantage and enhancing greater organisational performance.

Ekmekci 2010), conducted a study on "The importance of product positioning and globalbranding for sustaining competitive advantage within the companies' global marketing strategy". He projected that in today's globally competitive world, because of the globalization, new business patterns and the changing nature of consumers, the companiesfeel the necessity to act strategic in the market and to reach up the target markets and sustain maximum customer satisfaction in order to compete and survive. In this context, within the study it is tried to define product positioning in international markets and global branding strategies conceptually and to focus on their contributions to the overall competitive advantage of the company. Initially, the study tries to present the association between product positioning and global branding approaches of the companies and sustaining competitiveadvantage. Justifications for the examination of the importance of companies' international product positioning and global branding orientations as a basis of creating competitive advantage were derived from the literature. It is suggested that the companies' product positioning and global branding orientations and sustaining competitive advantage are the important aspects in multinational management and international business areas.

III. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

Research design means the plan and structure of investigation so conceived as to obtain answers to research questions. It is essentially the overall framework of a research project, the master plan within which various data gathering tools are used. It constitutes guidelines which direct the researcher towards solving the research problem. Hence research design constitutes the blue print for collection, measurement and analysis of data (Anyauwucha, 2006). The research work adopted a survey research. According to Anyaucha (2006), a survey research is one in which a group of people or items is studied by collecting and analyzing data from only a few people or items considered to be representative of the entire group. For this research work, non-experimental research design, the case study designs was used because it is appropriate for studying the problem of an individual organisation.

3.2 Sources of Data Collection

The two basic sources of data available are the primary and secondary sources. In order toachieve the objectives of the study and to broaden our knowledge, data ought to be collected, analyzed and appraised. The primary method of data collection was used for this research as the major source. The data was collected from respondents with the aid of questionnaires. The questions that constituted the questionnaire include those pertaining to personal information about respondents: sex of the respondents, age, and other questions, which was based on the problem statements of the research topic.

'The instrument of data collection in this work was the questionnaire. A questionnaire is document that contains relevant questions, items or statements on a particular topic orsubject, which is distributed to the target population so as to elicit their views, perceptionsand response in the documents. To this end questionnaires are meant to gather primary information from respondents. This instrument of data collection helps the researcher to gather much information faster and easier.

3.4 Population of the study

The study was conducted within the Kano Metropolis. To ensure adequate response and spread across some local government areas in the Metropolis, the questionnaire were distributed evenly to consumers of Dangote product across four local government areas in Kano metropolis, which are Nasarawa, Dala, Fage and Tarauni. In addition, the population was unknown i.e. infinite.

3.5 Sample size and Sampling Techniques

A sample is a subset of the population; it comprises some numbers selected from the population. A sample is finite when the total population for the study is known, where by it is infinite if the population is unknown. In the study, the population was unknown therefore, having an infinite population. Hence, a hypothetical sample size of 360 respondents (consumers of Dangote product) who were residents in Kano was adopted for the study basedon Attewell and Rule (1991) study for an indefinite population.

3.6 Method of Data Collection

Data were collected from primary sources, which the researcher extracted relevant information that were related to the phenomenon and specific problem. Primary data were collected by the researcher, which was obtained from respondents through the administration of questionnaires.

3.7 Method of Data Analysis

The instrument for the collection of primary data was questionnaire distribution. The primary data was measured using regression analysis. There were two variables' involved, theindependent variable; brand differentiation and the dependent variable; competitive advantage.

In analyzing the data collected with the aid of questionnaire, regression analysis was used in testing the two hypotheses. The presentation of data was in a tabular form showing the frequency of responses and the corresponding percentages for each alternative. The validation researchhypotheses was done using regression analysis to establish if the independent variable has anyinfluence on dependent variable.

Hypothesis One: Brand differentiation has no a firms competitive advantage.

Dependent variable: Competitive Advantage (CA)

Variables	Coefficient (dy/dx)	Std Error	Z stat	Prob.
Product Differentiation (PD)	0.0282	0.0102	2.25	0.014
Channel Differentiation (CD)	0.0106	0.0035	2.15	0.029
Image Differentiation (ID)	0.0169	0.0073	2.18	0.041
Personal Differentiation (PED)	0.0101	0.01440	1.14	0.282
Pseudo R^2	0.0938			
LR – chi^2	18.55			
Prob (chi2)	0.000			

Source: Authors Computation, 2018

Shows the linear relationship between brand differentiation and firm's competitive advantage with the use of ordered logistic regression analysis (Logit).

In terms of signs of the coefficient, which signify the effect of brand differentiation on firm's competitive advantage, it can be seen that all the four variables concur with a priori expectation with positive sign, this mean that there is direct relation between product

In terms of the signs of the coefficients which signify the effect of brand differentiation and customer loyalty, it can be seen that all the four variables concur with a priori expectation with positive sign, this mean that there is direct relation between Product Differentiation (PD), Channel Differentiation (CD), Image Differentiation (ID), Personnel Differentiation (PED) and Customer Loyalty (CL).

In terms of the magnitude of the coefficients, three variables Product Differentiation (PD), Channel Differentiation (CD), and Image Differentiation (ID) individually have positive significant effect on Customer Loyalty (CL) as indicated by marginal effect coefficient (0.0252, 0.0676, and 0.0698) with P-values of (0.018, 0.014 and 0.003) respectively at 5% level of significance. This implies that 1% improvement in Product Differentiation (PD); there is likelihood that it will induce 1.2% positive change in Customer Loyalty (CL). With 1% improvement in Channel Differentiation (CD); there is likelihood that it will induce 2.7% positive changes in Customer Loyalty (CL) and with 1% improvement in Image Differentiation; there is likelihood that it will induce 2.1% positive changes in Customer Loyalty (CL). But Personnel Differentiation does not significantly affect the Customer Loyalty (CL) as indicated by marginal effect coefficient (0.0067) with p-value (0.620) at 5% significance level.

Overall, the result of the LR- stat (42.63) with P-value (LR-stat) 0.0000 at 5% level of significance, the null hypothesis was rejected; this means that Brand Differentiation have significant influence on Customer Loyalty (CL).

IV. Discussion of Findings

This study assessed the effect of brand differentiation on a firm's competitive advantage. From the result of the analysis, the findings were as follows;

Objective I was achieved by Hypotheses I, which is depicted through ordered logistic regression analysis that there is link between brand differentiation and a firm's competitive advantage. Tlence, the null hypothesis was rejected. This means that brand differentiation has significant effect on a firm's competitive advantage.

This supported by the findings of Felicia, (2016); and Kireru, Ombui, and Omwenga (2016), where it was found that brand differentiation has significant effect on a firm's competitive advantage

Objective II was achieved by Hypotheses II, which is depicted through ordered logistic regression analysis that there is link between brand differentiation and customer loyalty. Hence, the null hypothesis was rejected. This means that differentiation has significant influence on customer loyalty.

V. Summary, Conclusion And Recommendations

5.1 Summary

The study of brand differentiation and competitive advantage in the market place is seen to be of relevance to an organisation as a determining factor for differentiating the product of a producer from that of other producers. The most distinctive skill of professional marketers is their ability to build and manage brands. Consumers view a brand as an important part of a product and branding can add value to a product. Differentiating a product helps a consumer to identify products that can benefit them, it also says something about product quality and consistency, branding also gives firms several advantages. The brand name becomes the basis on which a whole story can be built around a product's special qualities. The firm's brand name and trademark provide legal protection for unique product features that otherwise might be copied by competitors.

But firms were formerly into mass marketing, undifferentiating marketing, differentiating marketing and target marketing. A company can differentiate products, personnel, image and channel and having done this, a company must decide how many differences to promote and which ones to promote.

The first and second null hypotheses that were tested in the study were rejected because it has been established that there is a significant effect between a firms 'competitive advantage, its differentiation strategies and brand differentiation has an influence on customer loyally.

Brand differentiation was considered as a variable that would have an effect on a firm's competitive advantage. We can conclude (at 0.05 significance level) that a firm's competitive advantage is affected by its differentiation strategies, and lastly that brand differentiation has an influence on a customer loyalty.

5.2 Conclusion

The influx into the Nigerian market of different brands was followed by an awareness of the need for greater economic consideration by the consuming population in their demand pattern. This henomenon has brand as a non-easy job for firms to sell the product in question especially as they are substitutes.

Different brand differentiation strategies are being adopted by the firms and their marketers to make their various brands acceptable to the consumers, but more aggressive marketing devices need to be adopted by those concerned with manufacturing and marketing of this product so as to meet the ever-changing buying motives and pattern of the consumer. Neglect of this by any firm and its marketers may lead to loss of patronage/loyalty for the particular brand and eventually to complete extinction from the market.

5.3 Recommendations

i. In developing marketing strategy for Dangote products, it is recommended that the relative elements of brand differentiation should be blended to reflect the importance attached to having maximum competitive advantage in the market place that is; product differentiation, personnel differentiation, channel and image differentiation.

ii. For Dangote brand to be more successful in achieving customer loyalty, it should out performs other brands quality wise in the market, its price should be competitive and it must be reasonably available in important distribution outlets.

Since there is a high level of brand preference in the market, effective brand differentiation is critical to the success of a brand in the market. Thus effective competitive advantage will be achieved through distinctiveness in its differentiation and to achieve such distinctiveness, significant marketing resources will have to be employed so as to create distinct brand personalities, awareness and loyalty for the product.

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