

Examining the Influence of Brand Perception Dimensions on Relational Trust in Online Communities: Insights from Longrich consumers in Nigeria.

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ABSTRACT:

Advancements on the internet, such as social media and online communities, have driven significant transformations in communication and interaction in the business world. As a result, brands have leveraged on them to advance business opportunities. Despite continued impact brand creates especially in building perception, evidence shows it is still a battlefield for most organizations as they seek customers' attention. This follows the 3.5 billion people estimated to be suffering from oral health issues in low and middle-income nations. The study examined consumers' brand perceptions in an online community to understand how brand familiarity, brand differentiation, and brand choice relate to relational trust within the community. 138 users of Longrich products were sampled, and the findings revealed a significant relationship between brand familiarity, brand choice, brand differentiation and relational trust in the online community. The result reveals the significance of brands in online communities and indicates the important role of trust in facilitating decision-making to buy advertised brands. The implication is that brands play significant roles in the business world, where many brands compete for customers' attention.

KEYWORDS: *Brand choice, Toothpaste, Online community, Brand perception, Trust*

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INTRODUCTION

Advancements on the internet, such as social media and online communities, have driven significant transformations in communication and interaction in the business world (Novianti & Balqiah, 2023). The brand battle for customer attention has taken on a different dimension in the age of online communities. For instance, customers use online communities to share experiences and express their views about a product. The concept of an online community hinges on a group of people who share ideas, pains, and gains while also obtaining useful information that aids decision-making. It is instrumental in knowledge sharing and building bonds (Mardhiyah et al., 2023). Organizations consider it a useful avenue for co-creating and connecting with customers in ways that positively improve loyalty (Novianti & Balqiah, 2023) and for understanding consumer behaviour towards their brands (Uku, 2023). The attraction stems from customer engagement, which enhances interactivity (Futuwwah & Mardhiyah, 2019) and increases the likelihood of brand recommendations (Mardhiyah et al., 2023). For instance, international brands and local brands are utilizing it to build brand image (Chavadi et al., 2023). With respect to health products, they are consistently pushed online, such as through the multilevel marketing concept (Oloveze et al., 2021), to promote sales and brand perception.

The concept of brand perception plays a significant role in the survival and continuity of businesses. Consumers process brands based on their exposure, attention, and interpretation of the stimuli they send (Vainikka, 2015), as well as the appealing and satisfactory nature of the brands. Appeals such as emotional

appeal help to connect brands to brand perceptions. For instance, brand perceptions change depending on the brand's route to success (Amoah et al., 2022) even as companies closely monitor consumers' brand likes and dislikes (Haenlien et al., 2020). When brand intentions and brand promises are strong, how consumers perceive brands rises in the online community. For instance, in an online community, social interactions are linked to evaluations of brand promise and brand trust (Amoah et al., 2022).

Brand trust is confidence in a brand's reliability to deliver the promised value. It connects honesty and competence to a brand (Amoah et al., 2022) while serving as a significant factor in consumer behaviour (Oloveze et al., 2022a). In an online community, it not only facilitates customer engagement (Mardhiyah et al., 2023) but is also promoted by the increased usefulness of information within the community (Liao et al., 2023). However, relational trust relates to competence and respect (Sexton & Lamb, 2023) and to social exchanges and interrelationships within a group (Bryk & Schneider, 2002), often developed through transparency and support (Kwon & Kim, 2023). The challenge is that relational trust is often applied in the education sector, such as in relationships between teachers and students (Tennenbaum, 2018; Edwards-Groves & Grootenboer, 2021), but is rarely applicable in other fields despite the implications of interactivity, social construction, and interrelationships.

In brand management, the consumer-brand relationship is vital, as it can impact brand loyalty (Nobre et al., 2019), promote competitive advantage (Rambocas et al., 2018), and enhance profitability (Cho & Hwang, 2020). Brand management in oral health is becoming an issue. For instance, unhealthy practices such as the use of cow urine to cure toothaches pose health challenges (Osuh et al., 2023) and affect how brands are perceived against traditional practices. Indigenous people prefer traditional healthcare to orthodox healthcare (Oteh et al., 2021), while the current Nigerian healthcare system, with a shortage of experienced medical personnel, exacerbates these challenges (Oloveze et al., 2022). The implication is that the gap in the management of toothpaste brands has created opportunities for others, such as Longrich, to enter the market with a multilevel marketing model and an herbal solution aligned with locals' preferences.

In oral healthcare in Nigeria, traditional beliefs dominate oral practices (Osuh et al., 2023), leading to perceptions of chemical use that pose health challenges. Oral diseases are rising, as the World Health Organization (2022) says approximately 3.5 billion people suffer from oral health issues in low and middle-income countries. The implication is that we should discover safer solutions, as healthcare product consumers are now seeking evidence-based information when making buying decisions (Lee et al., 2018).

Longrich International is a company that combines multilevel marketing concepts in its sales of organic health products (Affe, 2019). The company offers over 2,000 quality products, including health products, organic food, nutritional supplements, cosmetics, cookware, home care, and personal care products (Famedix Pharmacy, n.d.). The toothpaste is positioned as an herbal solution that offers various benefits, including the treatment and prevention of dental issues. This positioning aligns with traditional beliefs about herbal solutions for oral healthcare, given the trust concerns that emerged as a restraint on purchasing toothpaste. Thus, the study examined consumers' brand perceptions in an online community to understand how brand familiarity, brand differentiation, and brand choice relate to relational trust within it.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Relational Cohesion Theory

The idea of relational cohesion theory, as propounded by Lawler and Yoon (1996), emphasises when and how exchange relationships between people occur and the commitment associated with the relationship. It is an important theory because of its contribution to the successful implementation of ideas (Metz et al., 2022) and its ability to reveal an individual's perception of a relationship in an exchange relation (Lawler & Yoon, 1996), in addition to the emotional connection to individual commitment in a social relationship or exchange process (Zheng, 2020). Outcomes from exchange relationships in relational cohesion theory can be negative or positive, depending on the formation and maintenance of bonds among the parties in the group (online community) (Pourazad, 2018). It reveals the relationships that result from positive perception and experiences that strengthen commitment, resilience and collective-oriented behaviour (Metz et al., 2022). Information sharing can occur in a community where people's psychological willingness to remain in the community exists (Lawler & Yoon, 1996). The theory has been applied in studies on consumer-brand relationship and customer-based brand equity (Pourazad, 2018) and resident commitment and tourism consumption (Zheng, 2020). Although the extant literature indicates that relational cohesion theory has received limited attention in marketing research (Pourazad, 2018), its relevance in this study lies in its focus on the relationship dimension, a valued aspect of online communities.

Brand familiarity

The concept captures consumers' perceptions of a brand's values and their understanding of its identity. The perspectives indicate consumers' knowledge of an organization's brand, which impacts their willingness to act (Ali et al., 2021). The perspectives could accumulate experiences associated with a brand (Chinomona & Maziriri, 2017). They are useful to consumers for evaluating organizations and brands, as consumers

depend on information stored in their memory when making purchase decisions (Chinomona & Maziriri, 2017). When consumers have sufficient information about a brand, they make quicker decisions and spend less time processing it. The quality of the information influences the likelihood of positive or negative brand familiarity, as Yazid (2023) argues that brand familiarity is either positive or negative depending on the information consumers have about the brand. Consumers who are well familiar with a brand display emotional attachment, especially when they feel the brand matches their expectations (Barijan et al., 2021). An increase in brand familiarity leads to higher trust or to similar levels of trust (Chinomona & Maziriri, 2017). Therefore, we propose the hypothesis:

H1: Brand familiarity with Longrich product in Nigeria significantly influences relational trust

Brand differentiation

The essential dimension is its ability to drive customer loyalty (Almugari et al., 2022). It helps organizations become more competitive (Emulent, 2023), contributes to business success (Ramotion, 2023), and positively impacts brand value (Gupta et al., 2020). From an emotional perspective, it is symbolic (Almugari et al., 2022), thereby impacting brand personality (Rauschnabel et al., 2016). As a useful strategy, brand differentiation is approached as product, service, and channel differentiation (Ramotion, 2023). The importance of brand differentiation is buttressed in practice with its various integrations in studies related to labelling (Gulzira & Han, 2019), innovation in marketing (Purchase & Volery, 2020) and creative advertising (Demir, 2017). Brand differentiation is associated with trust by improving brand commitment and loyalty and by building relationships. Therefore, we propose a hypothesis.

H2: Brand differentiation of Longrich product in Nigeria significantly influences relational trust.

Brand choice

Brand choice is important in consumers' decisions about brand preference and purchase. It is a consequence of consumers' knowledge and experiences with the brand (Danish et al., 2019). Decisions about brand choice are complex and not straightforward because of the various consumer decisions at different buying stages and the multiple consumer interactions (Keller & Swaminathan, 2019). However, consumers consider all available options and welfare benefits before making choices (Abaluck & Adams-Praseel, 2021). Understanding the buying decisions and choice-making process is a strong foundation for solving marketing problems (Giraldez-Cuz et al., 2023). This calls for understanding the diverse needs and preferences of consumers and the customer profiles in a competitive market (Rai & Budhathoki, 2023). Probst (2023) suggests that brand choice can be driven by what happens in people's lives, the important things in people's lives and fitting the products to them, and the ability of brands to meet the expectations of consumers. Studies suggest that brand choice is influenced by product features (Pongantung et al., 2019) and social factors (Elammari & Cavus, 2019). According to Chinomona and Maziriri (2017), trust plays a significant role in brand choice by eliciting customers' attachment to a brand. Therefore, we propose the hypothesis:

H3: Brand choice of Longrich product in Nigeria significantly influences relational trust.

Online community

An online community is associated with the formation of personal relationship networks on the internet. As an information channel in the health field, it is useful in seeking valuable health information to the extent that it impacts health literacy (Connolly et al., 2023). Information sharing is often enabled by online media such as Facebook and other groups, including WhatsApp groups (Mardhiyah et al., 2023). The importance of online communities to organizations' brands is evident in the growing interest among marketing practitioners in facilitating them (Shukla et al., 2023) and in the opportunities they offer for organizations to build long-term customer relationships (Mardhiyah et al., 2023). It can take different forms, such as virtual brand communities, virtual support communities, virtual sports communities, virtual food communities, and others, where people share interests (Deligoz, 2023). Online communities play an important role for organizations and consumers, especially in understanding consumers' decision-making processes, as organizations use them to influence consumers' perceptions and relationships (Anaya-Sanchez et al., 2020) and brand loyalty (Shukla et al., 2023). However, the concept of trust building in an online community demands proper community management by the organization, as consumers who join an online community tend to trust the organization's brand (Anaya-Sanchez et al., 2020). In this regard, consumers can perceive the organization as honest in its commercial activities in the community. The extant literature suggests that online communities can impact trust (Anaya-Sanchez et al., 2020). Thus, we propose the hypothesis:

H4: There is significant relationship between online community of Longrich in Nigeria and relational trust on brand choice

METHODOLOGY

Data collection

This study used an online survey and snowball sampling to collect data from respondents to enhance reach and referrals to members of the Longrich online community, in addition to purposive sampling that selected members based on their knowledge, experience, and involvement in the online community. A 5-

point Likert-scale questionnaire was used, with responses ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). The questionnaire included an explanatory text, a statement of confidentiality, a screening question to exclude irrelevant respondents, a guarantee of anonymity, and a link to the questionnaire that enabled respondents to share it with others in the Longrich online community. The instrument was hosted on Google Forms, with all questions marked as compulsory to minimize non-response. The study population is unknown but was determined using Cochran’s formula: the number of online community members at the time of the study was unknown. The Cochran formula, as recommended by Onyeizugbe (2013), uses a 95% confidence level with 5% precision (1.96) and an estimated proportion of 85%.

no = === 138

At the end of data collection, 178 responses were collected, but after screening the instrument for appropriateness, 138 were used for analysis.

Measurement model: validity and reliability

Taherdoost (2016) and Lawshe (1975) recommendations on content validity, as measured by the content validity ratio (CVR), were adopted to assess validity, as used in the extant literature (Oteh et al., 2021). The instrument was validated with a CVR of 0.6 from eight panel experts in the field, as Lawshe (1975) recommends a minimum CVR of 0.5 for eight panelists. Cronbach’s alpha was used to assess item internal consistency, with a baseline of 0.7 (Crick, 2023). The Cronbach’s alpha derived from 0.70 to 0.83, which indicates acceptable reliability.

Statistical Approach

Correlation analysis and OLS regression were used in the analysis. Pearson’s correlation coefficient was used to analyze the direction and strength of the relationships between the variables. Correlation analysis is appropriate for understanding the strength of the linear association. Regression analysis was conducted to examine the effect of the online community on relational trust in brand choice. SPSS v23 was used in the analysis.

For the regression effect between variables, the simplified version is given as:

$$Y = b_0 + b_1\chi_1 + e, \text{ where:}$$

Y = Online community

b₀ = Constant

χ₁ = Relational trust on brand choice

e = error term

RESULT AND DISCUSSIONS

The sample characteristics reveal that 68% were female and 32% were male. The education classification shows that 60% had tertiary education, 27% had secondary education, and 13% had primary education. The mean age of 43 years indicates that, on average, participants in the study were youthful. The toothpaste brands revealed that 76% of participants are aware of Longrich toothpaste and are actively involved in the online community, while 24% are aware but not actively involved.

Table 1: Outcome of hypothesis: brand familiarity and relational trust

		Brand familiarity	Brand differentiation	Brand choice
Relational trust	Pearson correlation	.579***	.558***	.623***
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000
	N	138	138	138

Note: ***Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

The results of H1, H2, and H3 in Table 1 indicate a moderately significant positive association between relational trust and brand familiarity and brand differentiation at the 2-tailed test. With the significant p-value, H1 confirms that brand familiarity with Longrich product in Nigeria is positively related to relational trust. Although the strength of the association is moderate, it indicates a positive relationship between relational trust and brand familiarity in the online community. This result corroborates the research of Chinomona and Maziriri (2017) on brand familiarity and brand attachment and extends the link between trust and brand attachment identified in the study. Also, H2 was confirmed following the p-value. It confirmed that brand differentiation of Longrich product in Nigeria is positively related to relational trust. This corroborates related studies on brand differentiation and trust in extant literature (Liao, 2023) and other consumer behaviour aspects in the marketplace (Almugari et al., 2022). H3 is also confirmed through the p-

value. It shows that brand choice for Longrich products in Nigeria is positively associated with relational trust, though the association is moderate. The finding corroborates that of Barijan et al. (2021).

Table 2: Outcome of hypothesis: online community and relational trust in brand choice

Variables	B	Standard error	t-values	Model summary
Constant	1.065	.171	6.246	
Relational trust	.782	.029	27.068***	
R				.816
R ²				.666
F-ratio				732.664***
Durbin Watson				1.918

Note: *** p<0.001

The relationship between online community and relational trust in brand choice is confirmed by the p-value, thereby accepting H4. The model is a good fit, with an R² of .666 (66.6% explained variance), and the Durbin-Watson test (1.918) indicates no evidence of multicollinearity. The result of relational trust (1.065) shows a positive link between relational trust and brand choice and online community. Thus, a unit increase in online communities leads to a 1.065-unit increase in relational trust in brand choice. The result supports the findings of Anaya-Sanchez et al. (2020).

Discussion

The study examined consumers' brand perceptions in an online community to understand how brand familiarity, brand differentiation, and brand choice relate to relational trust within the community. The data was pooled from online community members in Nigeria and analysed using Pearson correlation and OLS regression. All hypothesized relationships were accepted. Brand familiarity and relational trust in an online community have a weak positive association, thereby revealing a weak association between the Longrich brand and relational trust in the online community. The association between brand familiarity and trust is supported in the extant literature (Chinomona & Maziri, 2017). Brand familiarity carries value and brand identity for consumers, revealing the level of knowledge they have about the brand. A low level of brand familiarity with Longrich toothpaste indicates the need for greater marketing efforts. The weakness in the association could be due to the competitive nature of the oral healthcare market, particularly as locals align with traditional options. Further, it reveals consumers' insufficient knowledge of the Longrich toothpaste brand and the cautious nature of the online community members toward the brand. This is traceable to the prevailing role of traditional healthcare by the locals. According to Ha et al. (2022), the sufficiency of knowledge and information affects the speed of decision-making. Trust in the online community is important and could drive familiarity with the toothpaste brand. This is essential because brand familiarity plays a significant role in consumers' emotional attachment to a brand when brand trust aligns with expectations (Barijan et al., 2021).

The association between relational trust and brand differentiation reveals a direct, weak and positive association. Brand differentiation is associated with attributes of consumer involvement, which are influenced by consumer trust. Differentiated brands can attract consumers' willingness to trust them and influence brand loyalty (Almugari et al., 2022), but it is important for the differentiated brand to positively influence relational trust, with commitment to the brand promise, brand value, and quality consistency as top priorities. The significance of the result underscores the importance of differentiated branding practices. Positioning the toothpaste brand merely as an herbal solution is associated with consumers' trust, but the brand differentiation is insufficient given the weak association score. This is essential because of traditional beliefs, norms, and approaches to oral healthcare, given the prevalence of oral diseases. This implies that as brands like Longrich toothpaste become more differentiated in the marketplace, relational trust is important for positive consumer response.

The connection between relational trust and brand choice is of deep significance for the organization's goals and brand success. Successful brands are often chosen and reused by consumers. Consumer choice of a brand passes through important stages in decision-making, which Rai and Budhathoki (2023) assert are complex. In the toothpaste brand case, consumers' choice is associated with the Longrich toothpaste brand. Extant literature indicates that oral diseases such as mouth odour and tooth decay, attachment to traditional solutions, and the availability of herbal solutions are important considerations for consumers when choosing

toothpaste brands. The association between Longrich brand choice and relational trust supports the notion. Brand choice is linked to the information shared in the online community, while usage is linked to the level of knowledge and assertiveness about the benefits. In an online community, information and knowledge sharing (Wang et al., 2019) and social interactions (Deligoz, 2023) are promoted. The actions and inactions in people's lives, and what they consider important, impact brand choice, especially when they meet consumer demands (Probst, 2023) and have a memorable impact (Chacko, 2023).

The regression result showing the effect of online community on relational trust in brand choice revealed a growing adoption of online communities in Nigeria, given the high effect size. This is important when compared with Oloveze et al.'s (2021) survey report. In the Longrich online community, the importance of the online community is buttressed by its impact on brand perception. An online community facilitates trust building (Anaya-Sanchez et al., 2020) and positively impacts brand loyalty that speaks loudly about how consumers perceive an organization's brand. The result suggests that the Longrich toothpaste brand has a high chance of being chosen by consumers, depending on the level of trust from the online community. Social interactions in an online community help to understand how consumers make their decisions. Thus, engagement and interactions about brands that occur in online communities are direct invitations for marketing practitioners to identify customer complaints. This can be helpful for marketing practitioners in developing solutions to problems, managing online communities, and devising strategic approaches to build brand loyalty. Customer relationships are positively impacted by the rising adoption of online communities (Anaya-Sanchez et al., 2020), while information sharing helps promote health literacy (Connolly et al., 2023). Online community permits information and knowledge sharing (Deligoz, 2023).

CONCLUSION

Recently, online communities have become platforms for sharing information and fostering interconnectedness. Firms are using it to push their businesses beyond the boundaries of bricks-and-mortar. This study provides evidence of a significant positive association among relational trust, brand familiarity, brand differentiation, and brand choice. The critical role of relational trust in online communities is confirmed to affect brand perception and consumer choice. How brands such as Longrich toothpaste are perceived in online communities depend on the trust factor. Although relational trust is positively associated with Longrich toothpaste brand familiarity, differentiation and choice, the strength of the association is moderate. Generally, relational trust is important in brand decisions. However, there is a need for awareness programmes on the potential impact of online communities in Nigeria's oral health sector. The significant moderate associations call for consideration of the online communities as more than just platforms for sharing information, but as important for increasing interactivity, connectedness, and insight into the development and application of marketing programmes.

Theoretical Implication

Relational cohesion theory emphasizes the role of relationships in exchange, with social exchange and individual commitment at the base of the process. The connections between relational trust and brand familiarity, differentiation, and choice suggest the importance of valuable interactions and the role of trust. Perceptions and experiences influence individual commitment and positive behaviour (Metz et al., 2022), especially when the commitment is emotionally connected to the individual in the exchange process. The results confirm the importance of a trusted relationship in brand practices. People tend to trust brands they are familiar with and are more likely to choose them and remain committed to them. Although the association between relational trust and brand familiarity, differentiation, and choice is moderate, these experiences impact individuals' commitment and positive behaviour towards the Longrich toothpaste brand. This is further buttressed by people's psychological willingness to remain in online communities because of the information- and knowledge-sharing attributes that deepen usefulness and connectedness.

Managerial Implication

From a managerial perspective, to engage consumers/prospects profitably, marketing practitioners must ensure that content emanating from the firm's online community is free of bias or fake information. Thus, the management of online communities is essential to facilitate information management, identify customer complaints, and devise strategic solutions to address the needs identified within online communities. The need to disseminate reliable information and control implies that organizations need to assign staff responsibility for managing and controlling information that could damage the firm's reputation.

Practical Implication

Longrich operates like a multilevel marketing network, with its products, such as toothpaste, competing against other branded and unbranded toothpaste that are not on multilevel marketing platforms. Thus, the finding can relate to multilevel networking firms in Nigeria with online communities other than Longrich. The exclusive Nigerian sample provides vital insight into the operations of similar multilevel marketing companies in oral health products (such as Norland) as they strive to reach customers and build trust in their brands. To motivate people to join online communities, the content and quality of information, as well as

rewards and recommendations, are vital. For companies to enjoy immediate participation, the male gender is a key factor. However, joining an online community is one thing, and building brand trust is another. Therefore, it calls for a focus on strategies and relationships that deepen trust in the online community, given its positive association with brand familiarity, differentiation, and choice. However, given that the study is a cross-sectional survey, a longitudinal study is recommended to increase the robustness of the results. A larger sample size is suggested as the adoption rate of online communities is increasing in Nigeria.

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