

Brand Experience and Customer Retention By Soft Drink Firms: A Study Of Coca Cola And 7up Bottling Companies In South Eastern Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

The research examined the relationship between brand experience and customer retention with Coca Cola and 7up Bottling Companies as case study and South Eastern Nigeria as the study area. The study specifically investigated how affective and behavioural experience as dimensions of brand experience relate with customer satisfaction, trust, and loyalty which are key ingredients that enhance the ability of organizations to retain their customers. It was empirical survey research design rooted in mixed research philosophy. The population and sample size were estimated 300 respondents shared equally to the five states that constitute South Eastern Nigeria. Individual respondents from the states were randomly selected through convenience sampling technique. Questionnaire was the data collection instrument and the collected data analyzed with Analysis of Variance (ANOVA). The result showed that all the variables under investigation – affective and behavioural experience have direct, positive and significant relationship with customer satisfaction, trust, and loyalty that are core variables on which Coca Cola and 7up Bottling Companies depend on not only to attract customers but also to retain them for future business. Based on the findings, the research concluded that brand experience is a strong marketing variable with great influence on customers buying behaviour. Standing on the conclusion, Coca Cola and 7up Bottling Companies and other soft drink producing companies in Nigeria were advised to devote serious attention to research and development in order to enhance customers brand experience for their products as a strategy not only to attract them but also to retain them for future business.

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Introduction

Customer retention is a critical component of modern marketing strategy, focusing on maintaining long-term relationships with existing customers rather than solely acquiring new ones. In the words of Kotler and Keller (2016), customer retention refers to a firm's ability to keep its customers over a specified period by consistently meeting or exceeding their expectations. Explaining further, they emphasized that it involves fostering strong relationships, ensuring customer satisfaction, and delivering value that encourages repeat purchases. Gupta and Lehmann (2003) opined that practically, retention is measured by marketers using metrics such as customer lifetime value (CLV), retention rate, and churn rate.

In a competitive market environment, several factors influence the ability of organizations to retain their customers and brand experience is one of them.

According to Khan and Fatma (2017), brand experience refers to the internal and subjective responses consumers generate when interacting with a brand. These responses they explained are evoked through direct and indirect brand-related stimuli such as design, communication, environment, and customer service. Speaking in line with Khan and Fatma (2017), Iglesias et al (2019) pointed out that unlike brand awareness or brand image, which are more cognitive, brand experience is multidimensional, encompassing affective (emotional), sensory, behavioural, and intellectual aspects that collectively determine how a brand is perceived and remembered. Brand experience is a significant driver of customer satisfaction, loyalty, and advocacy. This point was strongly reinforced by Khan and Rahman (2017) when they stated that positive experiences not only enhance immediate customer satisfaction but also foster long-term emotion attachment and repeat purchases. In his contribution, Rather (2021) explained that in the age of digital communication and social media, customers often share their brand experiences online, influencing electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) and shaping the perceptions of potential buyers.

Interestingly, there are extant researches that dealt in one way or the other on the relationship between brand experience and customer/consumer buying behaviour by some researchers from different parts of the world. Examples include Brakus et al (2009) in the United States of America. They measured the relationship between brand experience and consumer satisfaction and loyalty. Ong et al (2018) in Malaysia examined the relationship between brand experience and customer loyalty. Iglesias et al (2019) in Spain assessed the relationship between brand experience and customer satisfaction, trust, and loyalty. A look at all these extant researches cited shows that none of them was done in Nigeria and also their area of interest different from that of the current study. Equally, their timing very far from the current research. These are knowledge gaps which the present study fills in the literature which gives credence to its necessity and underscores its contribution to knowledge when completed.

Statement of the Problem

The problem of this research is centred on recent comments and complaints circulating in the social media by the customers/consumers of Coca Cola and 7up Bottling Firms products in South Eastern Nigeria. While some consumers accuse the companies of indiscriminate proliferation of brands in terms of sizes, colours, labels, and even taste which they claim are confusing and therefore not allowing buyers make intelligent choice of which brand gives better satisfaction others, assert that the proliferation gives wider choice for the consumers and therefore increases their participation in the purchasing and consumption of the brands.

It is an attempt to verify the actual relationship between the firms' brands proliferation and customers experience with regards to the buying and consumption of the brands that prompted the researcher to engage in this research with South Eastern Nigeria as the study area.

Conceptual Framework

A conceptual framework represents a researcher's synthesis of literature on how to explain research topic. The framework maps out the actions required in the course of the study by breaking down the predictor and criterion variables into dimensions and measures and diagrammatically demonstrate their linkages.

According to Adom et al (2018), a conceptual framework bridges theory and practice, enabling researchers to contextualize their work within existing knowledge while identifying new directions for inquiry.

A conceptual framework for the current study is diagrammatically shown below.

Aim and Objectives of the Study

The aim of this study is to assess how customers brand experience relates with the ability of Coca Cola and 7up Bottling Companies in retaining their customers in South Eastern Nigeria. The specific objectives are to:

1. examine the relationship between affective experience and customer satisfaction from Coca Cola and 7up Bottling Firms brands in South Eastern Nigeria.
2. investigate the relationship between affective experience and customer trust in Coca Cola and 7up Bottling firms brands in South Eastern Nigeria.
3. examine the relationship between affective experience and customer loyalty to Coca Cola and 7up Bottling Firms brands in South Eastern Nigeria.
4. ascertain the relationship between behavioural experience and customer satisfaction from Coca Cola and 7up Bottling Firms brands in South Eastern Nigeria.
5. evaluate the relationship between behavioural experience and customer trust in Coca Cola and 7up Bottling Firms brands South Eastern Nigeria.
6. examine the relationship between behavioural experience and customer loyalty to Coca Cola and 7up Bottling Firms brands in South Eastern Nigeria.

Review of Related Literature

Areas covered in this section are conceptual review of brand experience and customer retention, theoretical framework, and empirical review.

Brand Experience

In today's highly competitive business environment, brands are no longer evaluated solely on the basis of functional benefits or product performance. Instead, customers increasingly value holistic and memorable experiences that influence how they perceive, interact with, and remain loyal to brands. This concept, known as brand experience, plays a critical role in shaping consumer attitudes, satisfaction, and long-term patronage. According to Brakus et al (2009), brand experience integrates sensory, emotional, cognitive, and behavioural dimensions, making it a central pillar of contemporary marketing strategy. Also in the words of Khan and Rahman (2017), brand experience is a significant driver of customer satisfaction, loyalty, and advocacy. They argued that positive experience not only enhance immediate customer satisfaction but equally foster long-term emotional attachment and repeat purchases. In their contribution, Iglesias et al (2019) opined that brand experience serves as a differentiation strategy in saturated markets. They explained that as products and services become increasingly commoditized, firms use unique experiences to stand out, offering value beyond functional benefits. Using Apple and Star Bucks to illustrate their point, they pointed out that Apple and Star Bucks differentiate themselves by creating immersive and consistent experiences across touch points, ensuring that consumers perceive the brands as unique, reliable, and emotionally engaging. Lemon and Verhoef (2016), stated that digital revolution has further amplified the role of brand experience in marketing. They explained that with the growth of e-commerce, mobile applications, and virtual platforms, brand interactions now occur across both physical and digital spaces. They therefore advised that for brand experience strategies to be successful, firms must design omnichannel brand experiences that are seamless, engaging, and customer-centric.

In practice, there are various dimensions of brand experience but in this study, the researcher worked with only affective and behavioural experiences.

Affective Experience. In marketing, affective experience refers to that emotions and feelings that a brand evokes in consumers during interactions. Brakus (2019) explained that affective experience goes beyond rational evaluations of product quality and functionality. They stated that it focuses instead on the emotional responses such as joy, excitement, trust, nostalgia, or even pride that customers feel when engaging with a brand. They argued that these emotions can be triggered by visual identity, advertising, customer service, or even word-of-mouth. Iglesias (2019) in their contribution, alluded to the points of Brakus (2019). They asserted that affective experiences are critical in marketing because they foster emotional bonds between consumers and brands, leading to stronger loyalty and long-term relationships. Buttressing their points, they argued that luxury brands often create feelings of prestige and exclusivity while family-oriented brands may elicit warmth and belonging.

Behavioural Experience. Behavioural experience encompasses the physical actions and responses that consumers display while interacting with a brand. Comparing affective and behavioural experiences, Brakus et al (2009) explained that unlike affective experience, which is internal and emotional,

behavioural experience manifests in external and observable activities such as purchasing, using, recommending, or engaging in rituals related to a brand. They pointed out that behavioural experience also reflects how brands influence consumers' lifestyles, habits, and consumption patterns. In his submission, Rather (2021), posited that behavioural experiences are important because they transform brand interactions into active engagement, making customers not just passive buyers but participants who co-create value with the brand.

Customer retention

Customer retention is a critical component of modern marketing strategy, focusing on maintaining long-term relationships with existing customers rather than solely acquiring new ones. In highly competitive and saturated markets, retaining customers has become essential for sustaining brand loyalty, and ensuring business growth. From a relationship marketing perspective, customer retention emphasizes long-term engagement rather than transactional exchanges. This approach aligns with the shift from product-centric to customer-centric marketing, where firms prioritize customer needs and experiences. Customer retention is widely recognized as more cost-effective than customer acquisition. Alluding to this point, Reichheld and Sasser (1990) stated that studies indicate acquiring a new customer can cost five times more than retaining an existing one. Buttressing their point, they asserted that loyal customers tend to spend more, are less price-sensitive, and are more likely to recommend the brand to others. Gupta and Lehmann (2003) stated that retention also contributes to increased profitability. They explained that as customers continue to engage with a brand over time, the cost of serving them decreases while their value increases, leading to higher margins. They pointed out that retained customers often become brand advocates, contributing to positive word-of-mouth and organic growth.

Customer retention is often assessed through key relational constructs that reflect the strength and durability of a firm's relationship with its customers. Among the most widely used measures are customer satisfaction, trust, and loyalty.

Customer Satisfaction. In the words of Kotler and Keller (2016), customer satisfaction is all about consumers' overall evaluation of a product or service based on whether it meets or exceeds expectations. This submission by Kotler and Keller is in agreement with the position of Oliver (1980). Oliver explained that customer satisfaction is rooted in the expectancy-disconfirmation theory which posits that satisfaction arises when perceived performance matches or surpasses prior expectations. In their contribution, Anderson and Sullivan (1993) argued that as a measure of customer retention, satisfaction plays a foundational role in marketing. They explained that satisfied customers are more likely to continue purchasing from a firm, exhibit reduced sensitivity to price changes, and engage in positive word-of-mouth communication. They asserted that high levels of satisfaction also decreases the likelihood of customer defection, thereby improving retention rates.

Customer Trust. According to Morgan and Hunt (1994), customer trust refers to the belief that a firm will act in the customer's best interest, demonstrate reliability, and fulfill its promises. They explained that trust is particularly important in situations involving uncertainty, risk. Or information asymmetry such as online transactions or service encounters. Garbarino and Johnson (1999) posited that trust serves as a critical measure of customer retention because it strengthens relational bonds and reduces perceived risk. They argued that when customers trust a brand, they are more likely to maintain long-term relationships, even in the face of competitive pressures or occasional service failures. They emphasize that trust fosters emotional commitment, which enhances customer resilience and reduces switching behaviour.

Customer Loyalty. Reichheld and Sasser (1990) stated that as a measure of customer retention, loyalty is often considered the most direct indicator. They explained that loyal customers not only continue to buy from a firm but also advocate for the brand, resist competitors' offerings, and contribute to long-term profitability. Oliver (1999) in his contribution explained that customer loyalty is the deeply held commitment to repurchase or continue using a preferred product or service consistently in the future.

Oliver emphasize that loyalty encompasses both behavioural aspects (repeat purchase) and attitudinal components (emotional attachment and advocacy). Lemon et al (2016) claimed that loyalty develops through a cumulative process in which satisfaction and trust serve as antecedents. They argued that satisfied customers who trust a brand are more likely to become loyal over time and that the progression highlights the interconnected nature of these constructs in driving retention.

Theoretical Foundation

This study is underpinned by Brand Equity Theory propounded by Keller in 2013. The theory posits that strong brand experience builds brand awareness, perceived quality, association, and loyalty. The assumption of the theory is that differentiated and memorable brand experiences strengthen equity, which translates into greater customer retention, as customers prefer brands with higher symbolic and experiential value.

Empirical Review

The focus of this section is on extant researches that are related in one way or the other with the current study and some of them are reviewed below. Almohaimmed (2019) in Riyadh Saudi Arabia examined the relationship between customer satisfaction, loyalty, and profitability and customer retention. It was quantitative survey research design. The researcher worked with a population of 497 respondents which also served as the sample size for the study. Questionnaire was the data collection instrument for the study while the data collected were analyzed with Linear Regression. The result showed that customer satisfaction and loyalty significantly influenced customer retention. The implication of the result is that positive brand experience which drive satisfaction indirectly enhances retention.

Iglesias et al (2019) assessed how sensory brand experience influence brand equity through satisfaction, trust, and loyalty. The research was done in Spain. It was survey research anchored on mixed research method. The population was 250 respondents and that was also the sample size. Data for the research were collected with questionnaire. The collected data analyzed with Structural Equation Modelling (SEM). The result revealed that sensory and emotional brand experiences significantly affect customer trust and loyalty, which in turn enhance customer retention. In addition, the study confirms that experience-driven brands achieve stronger relational outcome.

Merdiaty and Aldrin (2021) in Indonesia investigated the relationship between brand experience and customer engagement, with service quality as a mediator. It was empirical survey research. They worked with a population of 254 respondents which equally formed the sample size for the study. The data collect instrument was questionnaire. The data collected were analyzed with Analysis of Variance (ANOVA). The result indicated that brand experience significantly enhances customer engagement, satisfaction, and emotional attachment which are critical drivers of customer retention. The study equally highlights that continuous positive experience strengthens long-term relationships with customers.

Casidy and Wymer (2022) analyzed the relationship between brand experience and customer satisfaction, loyalty, and word-of-mouth communication. The research was carried out in Australia. The research design was survey anchored on mixed research method. The population and sample size for the study was 300 respondents. They collected data with questionnaire while the dada collected were analyzed with Linear Regression. The result revealed that strong brand experience improve customer satisfaction and loyalty which are directly linked to customer retention and advocacy behaviour.

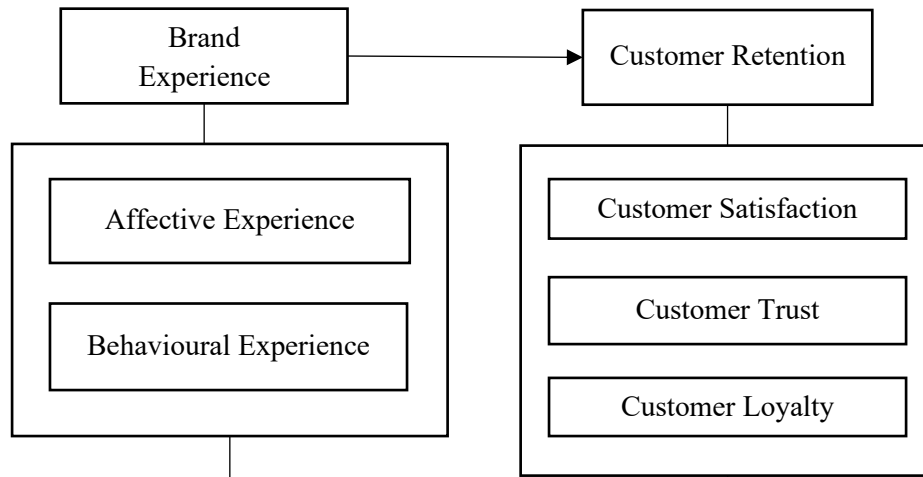


Figure 1.1: A conceptual framework showing the relationship between brand experience and customer retention ability of Coca Cola and 7up Bottling Companies in South Eastern Nigeria.

Source: Adapted from Adom et al (2018).

Research Hypotheses

The following hypotheses were tested in the research.

- Ho₁: Affective experience has no significant relationship with customer satisfaction from Coca Cola and 7up Bottling Firms brands in South Eastern Nigeria.
- Ho₂: Affective experience has no significant relationship with customer trust in Coca Cola and 7up Bottling Firms brands in South Eastern Nigeria.
- Ho₃: Affective experience has no significant relationship with customer loyalty to Coca Cola and 7up Bottling Firms brands in South Eastern Nigeria.
- Ho₄: Behavioural experience has no significant relationship with customer satisfaction from Coca Cola and 7up Bottling Firms brands in South Eastern Nigeria.
- Ho₅: Behavioural experience has no significant relationship with customer trust in Coca Cola and 7up Bottling Firms brands in South Eastern Nigeria.
- Ho₆: Behavioural experience has no significant relationship with customer loyalty to Coca Cola and 7up Bottling Firms brands in South Eastern Nigeria.

Methodology

The study is an empirical survey research anchored on mixed research philosophy. Due to lack of accurate and reliable data on the number of customers of Coca Cola and 7up Bottling firms in the study area, the researcher worked with a conservative estimated population of 300 respondents and this 300 also served as the sample size for the study. With judgmental sampling technique, the 300 respondents were shared equally to the five states that make-up the South Eastern Nigeria – Enugu, Abia, Ebonyi, Anambra, and Imo with each state having 60 respondents. Individual respondents from each state were randomly selected through convenience sampling method. The data for the research were collected with questionnaire. Expert opinion was used to test the validity of the questionnaire while test-retest method was applied to test the reliability and the result verified with Cronbach (1951) Coefficient Alpha. The data collected were analyzed with Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) under 95% confidence level and 0.05% margin of error.

Model Specification

$$CR = Bo + B_1BEae + B_2BEbe + e$$

Where:

CR = Customer Retention

BEae = Brand experience that emanates from affective experience

BEbe = Brand experience that emanates from behavioural experience

Bo = The intercept (constant) representing the baseline level of customer retention when all experiences are zero.

B₁ and B₂ = Regression coefficients indicating the direction and magnitude of the impact of each variable on retention.

e = Error term that captures unobserved random factors affecting customer retention.

Result and Discussion

A total of 300 copies of questionnaire were distributed to respondents in the study area. They were all properly filled and returned back. Therefore, analysis and decisions on this research are based on information from these 300 valid questionnaires.

Table 4.1. Biodata Analysis of Sampled Respondents (N = 300)

Biodata Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	180	60.0
	Female	120	40.0
Age	18–40 years	100	33.3
	41–63 years	150	50.0
	64–86 years	50	16.7
Total		300	100.0

Source: Field Survey, 2026.

The table shows that 60% (180) of the respondents were male, **while** 40% (120) were female. **Regarding age**, 50% (150) of the respondents were aged 41–63 years, **followed by** 33.3% (100) aged 18–40 years, **and** 16.7% (50) aged 64–86 years.

4.2 Bivariate Analysis of Sampled Data i.e. Hypotheses Testing

A total of six hypotheses were tested in the research and the test done with Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) under 95% confidence level and 0.05% significance level.

Decision Criteria:

P = Standard significance level i.e. 0.05

Z = Calculated significance level

HO = Null hypothesis HI = Alternative hypothesis

Accept HO and reject HI if $Z \geq P$

Reject HO and accept HI if $Z \leq P$

Ho₁: There is no significant relationship between affective experience and customers' satisfaction from Coca Cola and 7up Bottling Firms' brands in South Eastern Nigeria.

Table 4.1: Affective experience and customers satisfaction ANOVA results
ANOVA^a

Model	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1 Regression	21625.489	1	21625.489	60.14	.015 ^b
Residual	243.261	2	121.631		
Total	21868.750	3			

a. Dependent Variable: Customers satisfaction

b. Predictors: (Constant), Affective experience

The analysis in table 4.1 indicates that Z is 0.015. This figure is less than P of 0.05. HO is therefore rejected and HI accepted. The indication is that affective experience has positive significant relationship with customers' satisfaction from Coca Cola and 7up Bottling Firms' brands in South Eastern Nigeria. The F-value of 60.14 signifies that the strength of the relationship is strong.

Ho₂: There is no significant relationship between affective experience and customers trust in Coca Cola and 7up Bottling Firms brands in South Eastern Nigeria

Table 4.2: Affective experience and customers trust ANOVA results.
ANOVA^a

Model	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1 Regression	24200.000	1	24200.000	64.20	.005 ^b
Residual	418.750	2	209.375		
Total	24618.750	3			

a. Dependent Variable: Customers trust

b. Predictors: (Constant), Affective experience

Information from table 4.2 shows a calculated significance level Z of 0.005 which is less than the P value of 0.05. Based on this, HO is hereby rejected and HI accepted. Statistically, it means that affective experience has positive significant relationship with customers trust in Coca Cola and 7up Bottling Firms brands in South Eastern Nigeria. Also F-value of 64.20 signifies that the strength of the relationship is strong.

Ho₃: There is no significant relationship between affective experience and customers' loyalty to Coca Cola and 7up Bottling Firms brands in South Eastern Nigeria

Table 4.3: Affective experience and customers loyalty ANOVA results
ANOVA^a

Model	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1 Regression	18963.344	1	18963.344	65.01	.025 ^b
Residual	255.406	2	127.703		
Total	19218.750	3			

a. Dependent Variable: Customers loyalty

b. Predictors: (Constant), Affective experience

The calculated significance level Z equals 0.025. This figure is less than the P value of 0.05. HO is hereby rejected and HI accepted. This means that affective experience has direct positive correlation with customers' loyalty to Coca Cola and 7up Bottling Firms brands in South Eastern Nigeria. F-value of 65.01 indicates that the strength of the correlation is strong.

Ho₄: There is no significant relationship between behavioural experience and customers' satisfaction from Coca Cola and 7up Bottling Firms in South Eastern Nigeria

Table 4.4: Behavioural experience and customers satisfaction ANOVA results

ANOVA ^a						
Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	20805.844	1	20805.844	70.04	.005 ^b
	Residual	469.156	2	234.578		
	Total	21275.000	3			

a. Dependent Variable: Customers satisfaction

b. Predictors: (Constant), Behavioural experience

The ANOVA results in table 4.4 indicate that Z equals 0.005 which is less than the P value of 0.05. Therefore, HO is rejected and HI accepted. Behavioural experience has positive relationship with customers' satisfaction from Coca Cola and 7up Bottling Firms brands in South Eastern Nigeria. The F-value of 70.04 indicates that the strength of relationship is very strong

Ho₅: There is no significant relationship between behavioural experience and customers trust in Coca Cola and 7up Bottling Firms brands in South Eastern Nigeria.

Table 4.5: Behavioural experience and customers trust ANOVA results

ANOVA ^a					
Model	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1 Regression	21407.767	1	21407.767	71.05	.004 ^b
Residual	10.983	2	5.492		
Total	21418.750	3			

a. Dependent Variable: Customers trust

b. Predictors: (Constant), Behavioural experience

From table 4.5 above, the Z value is 0.004 and this figure is less than the P value of 0.05. HO is hereby rejected and HI accepted. The statistical indication is that there is positive and significant relationship between behavioural experience and customers trust in Coca Cola and 7up Bottling Firms brands in South Eastern Nigeria. On the strength of the relationship, the F – value of 71.05 shows that the relationship is very strong.

Ho₆: There is no significant relationship between behavioural experience and customers' loyalty to Coca Cola and 7up Bottling Firms brands in South Eastern Nigeria.

Table 4.6: Behavioural experience and customers loyalty ANOVA results

ANOVA ^a					
Model	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1 Regression	22519.763	1	22519.763	71.03	.005 ^b
Residual	948.987	2	474.494		
Total	23468.750	3			

a. Dependent Variable: Customers loyalty

b. Predictors: (Constant), Behavioural experience

Information from table 4.6 above shows that there is positive significant relationship between behavioural experience and customers' loyalty to Coca Cola and 7up Bottling Firms brands in South

Eastern Nigeria. This is because Z value equals 0.005 while the P value is 0.05. Again, the F-value of 71.03 signifies that the strength of the relationship is very strong.

Discussion of Findings

After the calculation and analysis of results, the research revealed that all the variables under investigation – affective and behavioural experiences have direct, positive and significant relationship with customers' satisfaction, trust, and loyalty which are core variables on which Coca Cola and 7up Bottling Firms depend on not only to attract customers but also to retain for future business.

Again, the findings of the research were in agreement with the position of some extant researches in the area. Some of the researches are the works of Almohaimmeed (2019) in Saudi Arabia, Merdiaty and Aldrin (2021) in Indonesia, and Casidy and Wymer (2022) in Australia. Almohaimmeed (2019) examined the relationship between customer satisfactions, loyalty, profitability, and customer retention. The result showed positive and significant relationship between the variables and customers retention. Merdiaty and Aldrin (2021) investigated the relationship between brand experience and customers buying behaviour and the result revealed positive and significant relationship. Casidy and Wymer (2022) assessed the relationship between brand experience and customers buying behaviour that could lead to retention. They discovered a positive relationship between the variables and customers buying behaviour in terms of retention.

Also, although the research discovered positive and significant relationship between brand experience dimensions – affective and behavioural and customers' retention measures – satisfaction, trust, and loyalty, the strength of the relationships are not the same. While affective showed strong relationship, behavioural displayed very strong relationship.

Conclusion

Based on the findings, the research concluded that brand experience is a strong marketing variable with great influence on customers buying behaviour. Standing on the findings and conclusion, managements of Coca Cola and 7up Bottling Companies and by extension other producers of soft drink products in Nigeria were advice to give adequate attention to brand experience in their business planning and strategies in order not only to attract customers but also to retain them for future business.

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