

INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL STATUS AND CORPORATE IMAGE ON CUSTOMER SATISFACTION: A TEST IN THE MOBILE PHONE SECTOR

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ABSTRACT

Corporate image is one among the intangible company assets, and when used strategically, it can ensure long-term company profitability through customer satisfaction. This study aimed at testing the influence of corporate image and social comparison on customer satisfaction in the mobile sector in Tanzania. A structured questionnaire was employed in data collection from a convenience sample of mobile phone users that yielded 98 usable questionnaires. Regression analysis indicates social status to be a significant predictor of customer satisfaction compared to corporate image. The results imply managers need not only focus on improving the corporate image but also enhancing the social status of their customers through their marketing strategies. Despite being sector specific, the study elucidates the impact of both corporate image and social status for the sector as well as for a specific marketing environment.

Key words: corporate image, social status, satisfaction, mobile phone

INTRODUCTION

The possession and the use of mobile phones in Sub-Saharan countries like Tanzania is becoming a common thing that translates into a potential market share for mobile phone companies eyeing such markets. Such a situation has attracted many mobile phone service providers to enter such markets leading up into stiff competition. In Tanzania with 59.2% of her population (25,618,446) being registered mobile phone users (TCRA, 2013) who subscribe from three main service providers imply the presence of stiff competition especially with switching behaviour being prevalent among subscribers. For the companies to maintain if not increasing their market share and profit, they need to be aware of the potential factors that influence their customer satisfaction that have been noted to have a significant positive impact on customer retention (Awwad, 2012; Wang & Lo, 2002). Most products and services being perceived as a bundle with tangible and intangible elements (Shostack, 1982) with the intangible elements becoming more valuable to the customer and thus being potential corporate advantage imply companies should pay attention to it. Among the intangible

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elements of a product include corporate image and social status emanating from the company and the consumer respectively.

Studies relating corporate image to customer satisfaction have been increasing (Bloemer & Ruyter, 1998; Brunner, Stocklin, & Opwis, 2008; Lai, Griffin, & Babin, 2009; Minkiewicz, Evans, Bridson, & Mavondo, 2011). Most of these studies indicate the possible influence of corporate image on service customer satisfaction. These studies have also been undertaken in other service industries apart from mobile phones. Lai *et al.* (2009) are some of those who have focused on the mobile phone sector with their study observing a positive significant effect of corporate image on customer satisfaction within the sector. Nevertheless, the study was set in the Chinese context that might be different from an emerging Sub-Saharan African country like Tanzania, which is being considered in this study.

With consumers being motivated to consume for social status (Eastman, Goldsmith, & Flynn, 1999), for scarce products/services and/or in an environment where social inequality exists like Tanzania where the growth of middle class is increasing, service companies like mobile phone can benefit by capitalising on the concept. With previous studies using self-product image congruency (Ekinci, Dawes, & Massey, 2008; Jamal & Goode, 2001) related to social status noting a significant impact of self-image congruency on customer satisfaction, this study embarked on using social status as an antecedent to customer satisfaction within mobile phone settings.

Aware of the knowledge gap in the literature, the present study sought to ascertain the influence of corporate image on customer satisfaction in the mobile sector; and test the influence of attaining social status through the use of services from a particular mobile phone company on customer satisfaction. The unique contribution of this study is the concomitant testing of two image aspects of a service – one emanating from the company providing the services and the other from the customers using the services.

EXPLICATION OF STUDY VARIABLES AND HYPOTHESES

Customer Satisfaction

Service managers pay utmost attention in satisfying their customers with the aim of influencing their post purchase behaviour and their behavioural intention towards the services (Bitner, 1990) which translates into profitability of their companies. Customer satisfaction has been dimensionalised differently by different authors. The widely accepted dimensions of customer satisfaction are affective and cognitive, together leading into the overall customer satisfaction (Edvardsson, 2005; Homburg, Koschate, & Hoyer, 2006; Oliver, 1993). The cognitive part of satisfaction entails evaluation of the attributes of the service being consumed against the expectation. The evaluation or interpretation aspect of satisfaction is typical of the cognitive dimension that is commonly evaluated using the disconfirmation paradigm. This has led some authors to use disconfirmation as synonymous to the cognitive part of satisfaction (Bigne, Mattila,

& Andreu, 2008). The affective part of customer satisfaction is the feeling component that is derived from the consumption of the services (Jani & Han, 2011) that include emotions, mood, and attitude. These two dimensions of customer satisfaction are likely to be important to those customers that are consuming a particular service for the first time where the customers are lacking 'cumulative' satisfaction (Brunner, Stocklin, & Opwis, 2008). Cumulative satisfaction is that which builds over time entailing customers to make continuous use of a service for a given period of time. Since the cumulative satisfaction builds over time with the cognitive and affective parts of satisfaction being integrated in forming the satisfaction, this study equates cumulative satisfaction to overall satisfaction of mobile phone customers who by nature of the services are required to consume the services for a relatively longer period of time. Thus, this study focuses on the overall satisfaction of mobile phone customers with the services they consume and relate it with their social status and the image of the mobile phone company.

Customer Satisfaction and Social Status

Consumers purchase products in order to satisfy a need or a want, meaning they will only engage in the purchase when they perceive that a particular product has value. Perceived value is defined as the consumer's overall assessment of the utility of a product or service (Zethaml, 1988). Sweeney and Soutar (2001) dimensionalised perceived value into quality/performance, price/economic, emotional, and social value. Performance value refers to the utility derived from perceived quality compared to the expectations, while price value is the utility derived from the product due to the reduction of its cost (Sweeney & Soutar, 2001). These two categories of perceived value were grouped together as functional value while the remaining two fall under non-functional value. Emotional value relates to affective states produced from the usage of the product while social value is that which enhances the social self-concept of the consumer of that product (*ibid*). Despite all the values being equally important to service consumers including those of mobile phone services, this study zeroed in social status value derived from being a subscriber of a particular mobile phone service provider. This emanates from insights provided by Srivastava (2005) who argues that the use of mobile phones represents a status of the user within a society.

Previous studies indicate customer satisfaction in general to be influenced by social values derived from the consumption of a particular service. Taurus and Rabach (2013) for instance argue for the possible influence of social value on customer satisfaction. In testing the influence of social pressure on loyalty of mobile phone customers, Taurus and Rabach (2013) noted the former to have a significant influence on the latter. They explicate social pressure as the need to conform to others who are consuming a particular service/product. Since customer satisfaction is one of the antecedents of loyalty, then the application of logic onto Taurus and Rabach's (2013) can be extended into the proposition that social status has a significant influence on customer satisfaction. We argue that not only is the need to conform to others important, but also the need to appear of a higher social status is important in satisfaction levels of

consumers in the mobile phone markets. Our argument emanates from the notion that different mobile phone companies have different market segments with some of them designing their marketing mix with the aim of positioning their services as of relatively higher social status.

Lee, Kim, Lee, and Kim (2002) in ascertaining the influence of perceived value including social value on customer satisfaction with mobile internet, noted social value to have a positive significant impact on satisfaction. Lim, Widdows, and Park (2006) in testing the influence of social value on satisfaction with mobile service, failed to affirm the respective hypothesis. Jani and Han (2013) in using social comparison, a related concept with social status, noted social comparison to have a significant influence on hotel guest satisfaction. Previous studies using self-image congruency (Ekinci *et al.*, 2008; Jamal & Goode, 2001), a much broader social concept than social status as used in this study, have noted the presence of significant influence of self-image congruency on customer satisfaction. Self-image congruency within consumption settings reflects the convergence or divergence of the image of the consumer with the product or brand being consumed. Self-image has been dimensionalised into actual-self and social-self image, with actual-self image reflecting how an individual feels about him/herself while social-image pertains to how an individual feels other see him/her (Back, 2005). These two dimensions have been further dimensionalised into ideal self-image and ideal social-image which are more imaginary in nature as they reflect the ideal status that the person has to attain. Since this study does not focus on comparing self and product (service) or company image, the self-image is not considered but rather social-image is; specifically, social status is used as a variable to represent social comparison. The use of social status appears to be more appropriate when ascertaining the individual feeling of a consumer being of relatively higher position compared to other by consuming mobile services from a particular service provider in an emerging market like that which is used in this study. With previous research pointing towards a positive impact of social value on satisfaction, this study aimed at testing the following hypothesis:

H1: Social status derived from using services of a mobile phone has a positive significant effect on customer satisfaction.

Customer Satisfaction and Corporate Image

Corporate image is one of the factors that are likely to influence service customer satisfaction (Richard & Zhang, 2012). Corporate image has been defined differently by different authors; some have taken a more holistic view while some have taken a more specific definition of company image. Aaker and Keller (1990) among those who have defined image in a specific manner define it as the perception of quality associated with the brand (including a company); it is perceived to be specific as it focuses on quality among other factors. A typical holistic definition of company image is typified by that of Bloemer and Ruyter (1998) who define it as the complex of consumer's perception of a company or brand based on different attributes. The image attributes that

culminate into the overall company image are many and diverse and they include merchandise, services, clientele, physical facilities, promotion, price, and service personnel, among others (Bearden, 1977; Doyle & Fenwick, 1974). Since consumers are unlikely to assess each of the image components before they have their overall image of a company but rather use heuristic mechanisms to come up with the overall image, we adopt the holistic perspective of company image.

Previous studies indicate the possible impact of corporate image on customer satisfaction. Andreassen and Lindestad (1998) tested the effect of corporate image on customer satisfaction and noted a positive relationship. Lai, Griffin, and Babin (2009) in extending Andreassen and Lindestad's (1998) study findings undertook to affirm the effect of corporate image on telecom customer satisfaction with the results upholding the relationship. As further extension of previous studies, this study aimed at replicating such studies under the African context with its mobile phone sector still growing. The following hypothesis served in guiding the study:

H2: The corporate image of a mobile phone company has significant impact on customer satisfaction.

METHODS

The study focused on the impact of corporate image and social status within the telecommunication sector in Tanzania. The study used a survey questionnaire with items capturing the three study variables being adapted from previous studies (Back, 2005; Lim *et al.*, 2006; Sweeney and Soutar, 2001) to ensure higher validity and reliability. On top of the three study items, the questionnaire had questions capturing demographics and usage behaviour of mobile telecommunication services by the respondents. Prior to administering the questionnaire, the questionnaire items were discussed with academics to ensure content validity. Items capturing company image, social status, and customer satisfaction were framed in a five point Likert scale with 1 indicating strong disagreement with the statement; 5 indicating strong agreement with the statement; 3 was used as a neutral point; while 2 and 4 indicated disagreement and agreement respectively. The other questions were nominal and ordinal in nature.

To minimise possible 'noise' that could have emanated from capturing information from users of different mobile phone companies, the study focused on one mobile phone company (*Simu*). The *Simu* mobile phone company was chosen as it is one of the major players in the market (TCRA, 2013). Respondents were recruited using convenience sampling as it was impossible to get the list of all subscribers for that particular mobile phone company as well as being near impossible to access them. A total of 120 potential respondents were approached by a trained research assistant in one shopping mall in Dar es Salam (commercial city of Tanzania). The decision to recruit respondents from the premises of a shopping mall was taken with the expectation of getting diverse kinds of respondents. The research assistant requested the potential respondents to participate in the study, and upon their consent the research

assistant interviewed them. The interview mode involved filling in a questionnaire by the researcher, in order to ensure the exercise did not take much of the respondents' time as well as give the opportunity to clarify questions in case the respondents couldn't understand some of them (Veal, 2006). The study hypotheses were tested through regression analysis. Prior to the regression analyses the scale items were subjected to factor analysis with principal component analysis and varimax rotation that served in testing the construct validity. The items that were loaded into their respective dimensions were tested for reliability through Cronbach alpha test.

RESULTS

Sample characteristics and mobile phone service usage

From the 120 respondents approached by the research assistant, 100 agreed to participate in the study. A total of 98 questionnaires were fully filled and were used in the analyses. Descriptive analysis indicates that male respondents represented 51% of the respondents. About 43% of the respondents fell within the age group of 26 to 35 years which represented the largest age group of the sample followed by that of 36 to 46 years. Those above 46 years were 13.3%, and those falling between 18 and 25 years were 12.2% of the respondents. The sample seemed to be dominated by more educated persons with 41.8% holding a university degree and 29.6% holding a diploma. Only 7.1% of the respondents had attained not more than a primary school education.

Results for mobile phone service usage are displayed as Table 1. The results indicate that the majority (82.7%) had been using the same service provider for more than a year, while 17.3% indicated to have been subscribers for the company for more than six months but for less than a year. None of the respondents indicated to have been using the company for less than six months. The respondents who indicated to have been subscribing to mobile phone services from more than one company were 72.4%. With respect to where respondents had got information about the services and the mobile phone company, 63.3% indicated advertisements to be the main source followed by word of mouth (34.7%); other sources accounted for 2% only. The majority (94.9%) of the respondents reported to have been using pre-paid services. As many as 71.4% said that network coverage was the main reason that had prompted them to use services from a particular mobile phone service company. Value added service as the main factor for selecting the mobile phone company was ranked second in motivating the respondents to subscribe to services from the company, with 11.2% indicating this reason as the main motivating factor. Call rates was identified by 8.2% of the respondents as the main reasons for the choice of the company, while SMS services was also picked as a factor for choosing the company representing 5.1% of the respondents. Other services were favoured by 4.1% of the respondents.

Table 1: Sample profile

Mobile phone usage	Frequency	%
Length of subscription on <i>Simu</i>		
Less than 6 months	0	0
7-12 months	17	17.3
More than 12 months	81	82.7
Have multiple lines		
Yes	71	72.4
No	27	27.6
Source of information about <i>Simu</i>		
Advertisements	62	63.3
Word of mouth	34	34.7
Other sources	2	2.0
Payment mode		
Pre-paid	93	94.9
Post-paid	5	5.1
Reasons for using <i>Simu</i> network		
Call rates	8	8.2
SMS services	5	5.1
Network coverage	70	71.4
Value added services	11	11.2
Others	4	4.1

Factor and reliability analysis

The means and standard deviations for the items used in the study are presented in Table 2. Before performing the inferential analyses to test the study hypotheses, factor analysis and reliability analyses were performed with results as indicated in Table 2. The items for company image, social status, and satisfaction loaded into their respective dimensions as indicated by the results. Item reliability for the three factors was above the recommended value of .70 for non-exploratory study (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1995) thus giving confidence in the use of the items.

Table 2: Means, standard deviation, factor loadings and Cronbach alpha for the study items

Item statement	Mean	Std. Dev.	Factor loading		
			Image	Status	Satisfaction
Expectation	4.31	.830			.808
Best service	4.54	.612			.807
Satisfactory experience	4.46	.691			.788
Good image	4.35	.628	.877		
Attractive facilities	4.35	.644	.806		
Good reputation	4.39	.652	.779		
Imaged service	4.14	.732	.673		
Current look	4.20	.657	.600		
Social group	4.17	.689		.821	
Personal image	4.07	.763		.784	
People info	3.88	1.008		.769	
Status	4.19	.782		.710	
Variance %			34.004	19.166	11.226
Cumulative variance %			34.004	53.170	64.396
Cronbach alpha			.814	.844	.788

Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin measure of sampling adequacy = .755**

Bartlett’s test of sphericity, Chi-square = 476.660 **

Testing Hypotheses

Multiple regression analysis was performed in testing the study hypotheses with the results shown in Table 3. The Durbin-Watson value (1.950) approaches 2, which indicates the independent variables are not significantly correlated (Field, 2009), thus allowing for the use of regression analysis. The results indicate only social status to be a significant predictor of customer satisfaction as the t-value (3.926) was significant at p value .000. The t-value for company image (1.869) is not significant at p level .05 implying that corporate image is not a significant predictor for customer satisfaction. Consequently, H1 is not rejected while H2 is rejected.

Table 3: Regression results of the influence of status and image on customer satisfaction

Variable	B	SE B	Beta	T value	Sig.
Constant	2.005	.554		3.620	.000
Corporate image	.211	.113	.176	1.869	.065
Social status	.367	.093	.370	3.926	.000
R ²	.196				

Adjusted R ²	.179
Durbin-Watson	1.950
F	11.562 (p = .000)

In exploring the possible influence of use of multiple service providers on the regression relationships, the regression analyses were redone with the usage status as a controlling variable. Two sets of regressions were performed with the first set picking only those subscribing to multiple service providers and the second set for those using single service providers – in this case the focus of this study (i.e. *Simu*). The results for the analyses are represented in Table 4. Company image as an independent variable for those using multiple mobile service providers had a slightly higher unstandardised regression coefficient (.296) in explaining customer satisfaction compared to the results for the whole sample (.211). Apart from being slightly higher, the t-value testing the influence of company image on customer satisfaction is statistically significant at p value .030 for those using multiple service providers, while for those using the same service provider had a t-value (-.480) that was not significant. The influence of social status on customer satisfaction for the two groups of customers basing on the use of multiple or a single mobile phone service provider is relatively lower for both groups compared to the sample as a whole with those using multiple service providers having an unstandardised regression coefficient of .341, and those using single service provider with a value of .354. The t-values ascertaining the influence of social value on customer satisfaction for both groups were statistically significant with p values of .005 and .030 for those using multiple service providers and those using a single service provider, respectively. Thus, the results affirm the influence use of multiple mobile service providers by mobile phone subscribers has on the effect of company image and social status on customer satisfaction.

Table 4: Regression of status and image on customer satisfaction

Variable	B	SE B	Beta	T value	Sig.
Constant	1.718 (3.460)	.650 (1.072)		2.641 (3.226)	.010 (.004)
Corporate image	.296 (-.102)	.134 (.213)	.248 (-.089)	2.218 (-.480)	.030 (.636)
Social status	.341 (.354)	.119 (.153)	.321 (.428)	2.871 (2.306)	.005 (.030)
R ²	.207 (.183)				
Adjusted R ²	.184 (.115)				
F	8.872 p value .000 (2.689 p value .088)				

NB: Values without brackets represent values for those using multiple service providers while those with brackets stand for those using single service providers.

Conclusion and implications

The study aimed at ascertaining the influence of corporate image and social status derived from using a particular mobile phone service provider on customer satisfaction. Consistent with previous studies, the results indicate social status to have a significant positive impact on customer satisfaction (Back, 2005; Ekinci *et al.*, 2008; Jamal & Goode, 2001). Contrary to previous studies (e.g. Lai *et al.*, 2009; Richard & Zhang, 2012), the current study results indicate that corporate image does not have significant impact on customer satisfaction. The influence of social status on customer satisfaction was upheld for those customers subscribing to multiple service providers as well as for those using one service provider. The influence of corporate image on customer satisfaction, despite being insignificant for the whole sample, it is significant for those customers subscribing to multiple service providers.

Theoretically, the contribution of the study is adding to previous knowledge. The fact that social status had a significant influence on customer satisfaction, confirmed previous findings and thus rendering the relationship applicable in a much more broader context including mobile phone markets in African countries (at least to Tanzania). Furthermore, the effect of social status as significant for different subscriber status – either being user of multiple service providers or a single service provider – further extends the applicability of the relationship under different contexts of the users. The lack of significant effect of corporate image on customer satisfaction might be due to the impact of service type (Bloemer & Ruyter, 1998) as well as being culturally determined. Andreassen and Lindestad (1997) noted that corporate image had a stronger effect on loyalty for complex and infrequent purchased services compared to non-complex services that are frequently purchased. From Andreassen and Lindestad's (1998), findings from this study that were derived from mobile phone services that can be considered as frequently used services that are not complex affirms the relatively lesser effect of corporate image on satisfaction. Compared to Lai *et al.*, (2009) findings that noted a positive influence of corporate image on customer satisfaction in China, the current study findings from Tanzania suggest that the relationship might be influenced by culture. Oriental cultures including China are collectivistic in nature compared to Tanzania that is relatively more individualistic (Hofstede, 2001). The scale items that were used in this study have higher validity (from factor loadings) and are reliable, which provides confidence for other researchers to use the items in research of similar nature.

The study provides several managerial implications. First, the observed positive significant impact of social status on customer satisfaction in the mobile phone sector implies marketers need to pay much attention on the construct while designing their marketing strategies. For instance, mobile phone companies can use promotional tools like advertising, with messages and pictorial cues that can convince their current and potential subscribers that they are likely to attain a relatively higher social status by using the company's services compared to non-subscribers. With the results indicating advertisements and word of mouth to be the main sources of information about mobile

phone companies, managers should keep on using advertisement as well as encouraging their current customers to share their experience with the company's services say through giving incentives to those customers who do so, like offering free SMS to customers who bring in new subscribers. The main factor that influences customers to subscribe to mobile phone services was noted to be coverage. In order to retain its current competitive advantage, the company should keep on expanding its coverage but not ignoring other factors like call rates, and provision of other services that enhance the value perception of the company services by customers.

Despite being informative, this study has limitations that should be noted. This study focused on two factors that contributed in explaining only 19.6% of variations in customer satisfaction among a plethora of other factors. Albeit the study was conducted in a specific sector of one country that serves in contextualising the study findings, the findings cannot be wholly applied in different contexts. Methodologically, the sample size was conveniently drawn and was relatively small. The findings should be interpreted with caution. Future studies should try to address these shortcomings in extending and complimenting the current study findings.

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