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Impact of Product Differentiation on Organizational Profitability: Lessons From 7UP Bottling Company Kaduna, Nigeria

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Abstract: This study examined the impact of product differentiation on organizational profitability using an ex-post facto descriptive survey research design with specific reference to Seven-Up Bottling Company, Kaduna, Nigeria. Three research questions were developed to guide the research. Product Differentiation impact on Organizational Profitability Questionnaire '(PDIOPQ) was used to collect data after it was tested and its content reliability coefficient calculated at 0.86, using Cronbach Alpha. Furthermore, its face validity was ascertained. Eighty-nine questionnaires were distributed to the respondents, but only eighty (80) or 90 percent were returned. Statistical analysis was conducted using both descriptive and inferential statistical methods. The study shows that product differentiation, product attributes and unique selling proposition had a significant impact on 7UP Bottling Company Kaduna. It recommends that, 7UP Bottling Company should embrace strategic change and the latest knowledge technologies to learn, unlearn and relearn newer innovative ways of doing business that will allow them to realize greater benefits.

Keywords: Product differentiation, Organizational profitability, 7Up Bottling Company.

1.0. Introduction

There is fierce Competition between substitute products bottling companies, which makes it challenging for some to gain market share, profitability, and customer loyalty. Often times, these organizations encounter unethical and unsustainable competition. Markets can become fierce battlegrounds where domestic and foreign players battle for the same market share (Cascio, 2003 & Indermun, 2014) due to unethical and unsustainable competition . Such dynamic environments are characterized by rapid change, high uncertainty, and unpredictable action of competitors and customers (Li & Liu (2014).

Hosseini, Soltani and Mrehdizadeh (2018) observe that rapid technological advances, globalization, and privatization expectations are among the environmental threats organizations encounter these days. Since the interaction between a business organization and its environments (social, economic, political, cultural,

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legal and technological and so on) this study is exploring how bottling companies in Nigeria are relying on product differentiation, attributes and unique selling propositions to consolidate profitability in spite of the fierce competition in the market.

This case study will attempt to answer the central research question of how product differentiation has become the key to achieving competitiveness, defining product attributes and sustaining them over long-term to maximize profitability, market share and customer loyalty. It is the true value of a company's brand that differentiates it from its rival brands and ensuresits success and survival. Mbah; Ekechukwu, Ede, Ugorji and Egbudu (2021) argue that the differentiation strategy can be exemplified by the provision of differentiated and superiorcommodities by firms.

1.1. Clarifications of Concepts

Product differentiation distinguishes a company's products and services from those of competitors to ensure that a company's customers receive unique, appealing, valuable, affordable and high quality product or service (Kotler & Keller 2012; Robbins, Decenzo & Coutler, 2013; Mateus, 2017; Chiguvi, Nyomi & Guruwo, 2017; Hosseini, et.al. 2018).

Schermerhon (2008) cites three examples of differentiation strategies within the soft drink industry as cost leadership, focused differentiation, and focused leadership. He notes that differentiation occurs when an organization's resources and attention are directed toward making its products appear different from those of competition. "Cost leadership occurs when an organization's resources and attention are directed toward minimizing costs to operate more efficiently than the competition while focused differentiation occurs when the organization concentrates on one special market segment and tries to offer customers in that segment a unique product" (Schermerhorn, 2008p.219).

Even so, the common thread running through all these generic strategies is the effort to appeal to customers. Besides, each generic strategy poses advantages that firms can potentially harness to enhance their success as well as disadvantages that may limit them. Most importantly, organizations seek competitive advantage in their respective market segments by differentiating their products, and this is the concern of this study. As an organization creates a competitive advantage, it strives to become competitive and achieve a distinctive position relative to performance in the market, based on its resources and abilities (Hosseini, et.al. 2018).

According to Porter (1985) competitive advantage is at the heart of a firm's performance in competitive markets. Researchers have demonstrated that manufacturing organizations viewdifferentiation strategy as a more important and distinct means to achieve competitive advantage in contrast to a low-cost strategy (Porter, 1980; 85; Kotha & Orne, 1989; Baines & Langfield- Smith, 2003).

Kotler and Keller, (2014) opine that there are a variety of differentiation strategies that a company can use, including product differentiation, service differentiation, personnel differentiation, channel differentiation, and image differentiation. Companies have the option of using different strategies.

To develop a differentiation strategy, it is essential to determine what makes an organization unique. Factors such as market sector, quality of work, size of the company, its image, graphical reach, and involvement in client organizations, the product, delivery system, and the marketing approach have been suggested by various researchers (Wallance, 2000). Hart, (2019) identified specific areas where one can differentiate the product's features, quality, reliability, price, location, brand image, marketing and promotion, distribution channels and post-sale's support. The adoption of new technologies, type of strategy, and quality of products among other factors were also considered important influence onsuperior performance of firms.

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Raduan, Jegak, Haslinda, and Alimin (2009) affirm that a business that does something distinctive, and difficult to replicate, would always have a competitive advantage which is more profitable than those of its rivals. Smith (2007) avers that, the most effective ways of establishing a competitive edge are probably to use improvement and innovation to create layers of technological advantages, economies of scale and strategic alliances with suppliers in order to deprive competitors of raw materials.

Porter (1980) identifies five forces that prevent a company firms being stuck in the middle of the road to include: competition within the industry, threat of new entrants into the market; potential to use alternative products or services; bargaining power of suppliers and bargaining power of customers. "Companies need to be aware of competitor's strength, newcomer threats, suppliers, customers, and substitute goods issues, and create a formidable wall against them by having a unique and hard- to-imitate brand".

Organizational Profitability

Bryman (2012) describes profitability as a situation where the generated income for a particular period exceeds the expenses incurred over the same length of time, majorly for the purpose of generating income**.** Profit is the amount of money a business earns above or beyond what it spends for salaries and other expenses (Nickels, Mchugh & Mchugh, 2005).

Profitability is a primary measure of all overall success of a company (Shafiwu & Mohammed, 2013). Luper and Kwanum (2012) posit that organizational profitability can be measured in terms of returns on asset and returns on equity. Most businesses measure their growth based on their profitability, revenue, and other financial data. Other business owners may assess their growth through sales, number of employees, physical size, success of a product line, or increased market share.

Raduan, Jegak, Haslinda and Alimin (2009) note that firms doing things distinctive and difficult to duplicate will likely have greater profitability than their competitors. Porter (1990) maintains that the profitability of firms depends on industry attractiveness and relative position of the firm in the industry. Organizations should deploy work practices that encourage the development of employee skills and foster social connections across employees to raise productivity and enhance organizational growth (Anekwe, et. al. 2021).

Increasing organization profitability results in a multitude of benefits, among which are: increased efficiencies from economies of scale, greater power, and greater ability to withstand market fluctuations, and increased profitability and efficiency. Rothaermel (2015) argues that product differentiation can generate superior profitability because it provides customers with brandloyalty that buffers them against competitive rivalry, and this, in turn reduces market sensitivityto price changes.

Profile of Seven-Up Bottling Company

Seven-Up (7UP) Bottling Company Limited is a soft drink manufacturing company that has its headquarters in Lagos, Nigeria. It is one of the largest bottling companies in Nigeria with its branches located in different parts of Nigeria. It specializes in producing and distributing some ofthe nation's most -loved beverages in the country such as; Pepsi, 7Up, Mirinda, Teem, Mountain Dew, H2oH, Lipton Ice Tea, Supa Komando Energy Drink and Aquafina premium drinking water to consumers. Its shares were previously quoted on the Nigerian Stock Exchange but after a buyout of outstanding public shares by the investment arm of the founder's family, it became privately owned.

The Context of Product Differentiation and Profitability

Product differentiation can be described as a marketing strategy utilized by firms to ensure that a company's clients (customers) receive unique, appealing, valuable, affordable, and high-quality products

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within a time frame that will stand the test of time and offer them deeper satisfaction and loyalty. Mateus (2017) affirms that differentiation is more concerned with providing unique and innovative products and should be regarded as going beyond products or service attributes to encompass everything that positively influence the value that customers derive from it.

Differentiation shows that the product is unique and valued by customers (Adio, Bananda & Eluka, 2018). Pahwa (2021) asserts that product differentiation distinguishes an offering (product or service) from others in the market to make it more appealing to the market. To differentiate products, the characteristics can be emphasized over the quality. Such differentiation can be horizontal when different products are sold at the same price but consumers do not evaluate them at the same level of quality. Or vertical, when goods are differentiated both via characteristics and quality. Smith (2007) avers that, marketing research can play a vital role in bringing to market a product that is valued by customers and which is presented to them in an enjoyable way. To be effective, the message of differentiation must reach the clients, as the customers' perceptions of the company are important. Product differentiation can only continue to succeed on the basis of customer perceptions of the product attributes and uniqueness, which implies that organizations must develop strengths in marketing their products, designing, market research, and development, as well as creativity.

Using Porters five forces as a guide, 7UP bottling company which is the case study in this research, can increase its competitive advantage by strategically utilizing methods such as "SWOT (Strength, weakness, opportunities and threat analysis) and PESTL (political, economic, socio-cultural, technological, environmental and legal factors) to scan the environment and take into consideration both prospective and existing competitors among others. An organization that wants to maximize profits must achieve high productivity, high capacity utilization, and bargaining power to negotiate the best production, price, lean production methods, effective production processes and efficient distribution channels. More so, "for an organization to perform well, its resources must be well utilized and its customers must be well served''. (Schermerhorn, 2008 p. 11).

Research Questions

Based on the conceptualization of product differentiation and the attendant attributes such as product design, unique selling proposition, and so on, this study will respond to the following research questions:

i. To what extent are product attributes effective in driving organizational profitability with particular reference to 7UP bottling company Kakuri in Kaduna State, Nigeria?

ii. What is the impact of unique selling proposition on organizational profitability?

iii. Does product differentiation improve organizational profitability?

2. Research Gap

Authors and researchers prior to this study looked at product differentiation strategies as a way to build competitive advantage more especially in the financial institutions, oil and gas industry and detergents by making customers more loyal, less price sensitive and less willing to consider alternatives neglecting the impact of product differentiation on the profitability of firms. The effect of product differentiation on profitability in the manufacturing and distribution industries can vary, but none of the authors nor researchers has been able to identify which specific product differentiation strategy results in the highest levels of profitability in Nigeria.

A review of several empirical studies related to the topic of study was performed. Studies on the effect of product differentiation on profitability in the petroleum sector; the relationship between the differentiation

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strategy and profitability and the effect of product differentiation in the beverages company; banks and relationship between manufacturing strategy and competitive strategy were a few examples. Interestingly, none of the empirical studies or any of the literatures reviewed dealt with the impact of product differentiation on soft mineral drinks like seven-up, a bottling company, a subject to which this study seeks to fill the gap. The impact of product differentiation strategies on organizational profitability of mineral soft drink manufacturing companies such as seven-up bottling companies remains unexplored, which is the cornerstone of this study and the purpose of this study.

3.0. Method

The study employed an ex-post facto type descriptive survey research design due to the fact that the dependent variable, the firm's organization profitability, had already been experienced by the consumers.

3.1. Population of the Study

The 7UP bottling company, Kaduna, Nigeria; which was used in this study as the case study has a total of 115 employees, this forms the target population.

3.2. Sample Size and Sampling Techniques

A sampling method known as accidental sampling was used due to the prevalence of insecurity in Nigeria, particularly Kaduna State, and the COVID-19 pandemic protocol of social distancing. Using this technique, any element encountered by the researcher that also fit within the parameters of the population for the study could be considered a sample. To arrive at a finite population, Yamane (1968) postulated the following formula:

$$n = \frac{N}{1 + N(e)^2}$$

Where;

n = the sample size,

N = the population size, 1 is constant

e = the level of precision.

$$n = \frac{115}{1 + 115(0.05)^2}$$

$$n = \frac{115}{1 + 115(0.0025)}$$

$$n = \frac{115}{1 + 0.2875}$$

$$n = \frac{115}{1.2875}$$

$$\boldsymbol{n = 89}$$

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3.3. Research Instrument

In the case of this study, a modified version of the Product Differentiation Impact on Organizational Profitability Questionnaire (PDIOPQ) was used for data collection after reliability and validity tests were conducted. Its content reliability coefficient internal consistency was calculated using the Cronbach alpha reliability test at 0.86, indicating a high reliability. The validity aspect was supported by evidence of face validity.

The first four questions under section B; was used to determine the extent of impact product attributes has on profitability of 7up Company, the respondents were asked to indicate (on a five-point Likert scale) their degrees of agreement, indifferent or disagreement with the developed questionnaires. The respondents were required to read each statements and tick (✓) the cell which appeals to them most or corresponds closely to their feeling.

The second set of four questions were designed to evaluate the impact of unique selling proposition on profitability of 7up bottling company, they were asked to indicate (on a five-point Likert scale) their degrees of agreement, indifferent or disagreement in the developed questionnaire. The respondents were required to read each statements and tick (✓) the cell whichappeals to them most or corresponds closely to their feeling.

The last set of four questions in section B were formulated to find out whether product differentiation has positive impact on profitability of 7up Company, they were asked to indicate (on a five-point Likert scale) their degrees of agreement, indifferent or disagreement in the developed questionnaire .The respondents in this section were required to read each statements and tick (✓) the cell which appeals to them most or corresponds closely to their feelings.

3.4. Data Presentation

Table 1: The Impact of Product's Attributes on Profitability

Factor	Department	Frequency	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Undecided	Agree	Strongly Agree	Total
Customers prefer Appealing name andID	Finance	Frequency	-	-	0	7	6	13
	Marketing	Frequency	-	-	4	0	20	24
	Sales	Frequency	-	-	6	6	31	43
		Total	-	-	10	13	57	80
		Percent	-	-	12.5%	16.2%	71.2%	100.0%
Product with Appealing colour and shape attracts sales	Finance	Frequency	-	0	3	4	6	13
	Marketing	Frequency	-	0	1	4	19	24
	Sales	Frequency	-	4	2	7	30	43
		Total	-	4	6	15	55	80
		Percent	-	5.0%	7.5%	18.8%	68.8%	100.0%

Source: Field Survey, May 2021

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Table 2: Impact of Product's Non-Physical Attributes on Profitability of Company

Factor	Department	Frequency	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Undecided	Agree	Strongly agree	Total
Product Price and gram attractsmore patronage	Finance	Frequency	-	-	0	5	8	13
	Marketing	Frequency	-	-	2	2	20	24
	Sales	Frequency	-	-	2	5	36	43
		Total	-	-	4	12	64	80
		Percent	-	-	5.0%	15.0%	80.0%	100.0%
Product Flavor and other attributes attractsmore sales	Finance	Frequency	-	0	0	0	13	13
	Marketing	Frequency	-	0	0	6	18	24
	Sales	Frequency	-	2	3	6	32	43
		Total	-	2	3	12	63	80
		Percent	-	2.5%	3.8%	15.0%	78.8%	100.0%

Source: Field Survey, May 2021

The Impact of Product Uniqueness and Market Strategies on Profitability of Company

Table 3: Level of Impact of a Product's Uniqueness and Market Strategies on Profitability of Company

Factor	Department	Frequency	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Undecided	Agree	Strongly Agree	Total
Unique Product taste increases productivity	Finance	Frequency	-	-	1	0	12	13
	Marketing	Frequency	-	-	1	5	18	24
	Sales	Frequency	-	-	4	7	32	43
		Total	-	-	6	12	62	80
		Percent	-	-	7.5%	15.0%	77.5%	100.0%
Brand Varieties increases Marketshare	Finance	Frequency	0	-	0	4	9	13
	Marketing	Frequency	1	-	1	11	11	24
	Sales	Frequency	0	-	3	9	31	43
		Total	1	-	4	24	51	80
		Percent	1.2%	-	5.0%	30.0%	63.8%	100.0%

Source: Field Survey, May 2021

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Table 4.4a Product Differentiation Influence on Profitability of Company

Factor	**Department**	**Frequency**	**Strongly Disagree**	**Disagree**	**Undecided**	**Agree**	**Strongly Agree**	**Total**
Strategic promotional jingle increases competitive advantage	Finance	Frequency	-	-	1	4	8	13
	Marketing	Frequency	-	-	1	4	19	24
	May Sales	Frequency	-	-	0	13	30	43
		Total	-	-	2	21	57	80
		Percent	-	-	2.5%	26.2%	71.2%	100.0%
Strategic audience targeting increases profit	Finance	Frequency	-	0	0	3	10	13
	Marketing	Frequency	-	1	2	4	17	24
	Sales	Frequency	-	0	3	8	32	43
		Total	-	1	5	15	59	80
		Percent	-	1.2%	6.2%	18.8%	73.8%	100.0%

Source: Field Survey, May 2021

Table 4.4b: Product Differentiation Influence on Profitability of Company

Factor	**Department**	**Frequency**	**Strongly Disagree**	**Disagree**	**Undecided**	**Agree**	**Strongly agree**	**Total**
Market segmentation increases product spread	Finance	Frequency	-	-	0	0	13	13
	Marketing	Frequency	-	-	2	1	21	24
	Sales	Frequency	--	-	3	4	36	43
		Total	-	-	5	5	70	80
		Percent	-	-	6.2%	6.2%	87.5%	100.0%
Good understanding of competitor's activities ensures	Finance	Frequency		-	-	4	9	13
	Marketing	Frequency	-	-	-	4	20	24
	Sales	Frequency	-	-	-	16	27	43
product survival								
		Total	-	-	-	24	56	80
		Percent	-	-	-	30.0%	70.0%	100.0%

Source: Field Survey, May 2021

4.0. Discussion of Findings

The result showed that product's attributes and differentiation; its uniqueness and market strategies are all factors that have direct impact on the profitability of Seven –Up Bottling Company, Kaduna. From the

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results, good understanding of competitor's activities ensures product survival which falls under market strategies stood out as the factor that has all the respondents (100%) agreeing and strongly agreeing that it directly impacts profits of the company.

This is understandably so because companies do not have monopoly in a capitalistic setting like Nigeria. Also, market strategy plays a huge role because when goods are produced, they must find their way to the end user and having an understanding of what other competitors who are vying for the demand of the same target population could be very vital in whether a company has high sales or not.

These findings are in agreement with the submission of Christina (2019); Dirisu et.al. (2013); Anekwe 2021; Openstax (2019); Teece (2018); Adio, et.al (2018) &Carol (2021) though in different organizations. OPenstax (2019 p.266-267) state that, 'a firm achieves a competitive advantage by adding value to its products and services or reducing its own costs more efficiently than its rivals in the industry. Furthermore, it is in line with the theoretical framework of this study that is based on Resource-based theory and its management. The theory is based on the fact that when companies possess resources that are rare, valuable, and hard to copy and delivered on time they can attain a sustained competitive edge.

This study has established that Product differentiation as an independent or predictor variables offered causal explanations for variations on the dependent variable which is organizational profitability. Result of the statistical analysis done revealed that;

Product's physical attributes such as products name and ID have a direct impact on the profitability of seven-up bottling company Kaduna. This signifies that brand name and features of the products are crucial elements in organizational profitability.

Also, the study revealed that unique selling proposition as marketing strategy has a direct impact on organization profitability. Thus, shows the significance of using good marketing strategies in organizations such as pricing, durable and market segregation among others so as to win the customers, promote sales, market shares and profitability.

The study also shows that product differentiation has a direct impact on organizational profitability. It shows the importance of making one's product appealing, unique and affordable to customers. With these avenues, 7up bottling company will be able to multiply profitability, market share, and customers, making them the talk of the town as many would love to identify with them and become their clients, no matter how high the cost of their products or services may be. Furthermore, the study has shown the importance effective and efficient utilization of organizational resources as this study was hinged on the resource based and dynamic theories which expounded on this issue extensively.

5.0. Recommendations

The study recommends that since product differentiation is critical for profitability, 7up bottling Company, Kaduna should continue to hire seasoned and qualified brand image strategic planners to help them sustain their product attributes and unique selling proposition in order to withstand and survive any type of intense competition found within the soft drink environment and beyond it. The company should also embrace strategic change and the latest knowledge technologies (KT) to enable them effectively and efficiently differentiate the attributes and unique selling proposition in such a way that it will never have a replica so as to realize greater benefits, customer royalty and greater market share.

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Suggestion for further Studies

As the study focused on Kaduna, Nigeria, seven-up bottling company has many outstations throughout Nigeria, the research could be extended to other States in Nigeria for a broader cover. The profitability contribution of each product of seven up bottling company should be evaluated in future research .

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