CONSUMERS' PREFERENCE AND PERCEPTION OF SOFT DRINKS IN BENIN CITY

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Abstract

The consumption of soft drinks has become a daily routine for many consumers. This study examines Consumers' perception and preference of soft drinks in Benin City. It sought to identify: the most preferred soft drink brand among consumers; factors that consumers consider in selecting a soft drink; and the level of customers satisfaction with selected soft drink brands. In addition to the above, the study also sought to ascertain if the level of soft drink consumption varied across selected demographic variables. Survey involving the use of questionnaires was adopted as the research design. The population for this study comprised of soft drink consumers in Benin City. A sample of four hundred (400) respondents was conveniently selected to represent the population. Data obtained was analyzed using both descriptive and inferential statistics. Result showed that Coke was the most preferred soft drink brand among consumers. Taste turned out to be the most important factor consumers consider in selecting soft drink. The study also revealed that level of soft drink consumption tended to vary with age (p=0.000), educational level (p=0.000), occupation (p=0.000), income level (p=0.000), marital status (p=0.000) but not gender (p=0.054). The study recommended that manufacturers/producers of soft drinks improve on the taste of their brand as it a major determinant of consumers' perception and consumption level.

Keywords: Consumer perception; Consumer preference; Soft drinks; Soft drink brands; Benin City

Introduction

Soft drinks are among the popular products today (Lazim & Hasliza, 2011). The consumption and popularity of various soft drink brands has continued to steadily increase due to strong preference for palatable sweet taste, at a reasonably low cost (Sartor, Donaldson, Markland, Loveday, Jackson & Kubis, 2011). Generally, all nonalcoholic drinks are referred to as soft drinks (Barbara, 2006). Soft drinks may therefore be in the form of sugar-sweetened beverage (SSB), diet and non-diet drinks, carbonated soft drinks (CSD), fruit beverage, juice drink, fruit-flavored drinks and bottled drinks. Globally however, the most popular soft drink brands are Coke and Pepsi and the story of the nonalcoholic sector has tended to center on the power struggle between these two soft drink brands (Barbara, 2006).

Despite the global increase in the consumption of soft drinks to around one-can per day (Sartor *et al*, 2011), general results shows that consumption of both regular and light soft drinks is still very low (Renwick & Nordmann, 2007). Presently ranked 4th in the World in term of consumption of soft drinks (Beverage Industry News, 2017), the soft drink industry in Nigeria still has a huge potential for growth given the total population. Regardless of this potential, some soft drink companies have recorded a fall in revenue and profit due to weak consumer demand (Beverage Industry News, 2016). Weak consumer demand may be attributed to a number of reasons including consumers' preference and perception of soft drink brands. For instance, people with high body weights have been reported to prefer soft drinks with low sugar (Elfhag, Tynelius, Rasmussen, 2007).

Perception of reality usually varies from one customer to the other (Agbonifoh, Ogwo, Nnolim & Nkamebe (2007). Different definitions have been offered for the term 'Customers' perception'. Lewis (1989) defined it as consumer judgments of the actual performance. It may also be defined as the process by which an individual selects, organizes and interprets stimuli into a meaningful and coherent picture of the world (Schiffman & Kanuk, 2009). It is trite knowledge that factors which affect perception may be broadly categorized as personal factors and factors in the object (Schiffman & Kanuk, 2009). Personal factors that have been found to influence perception and consumer evaluation of product performance include: exposure, experience, education, expectations, values, needs, age, attentiveness and confidence. Factors in the object that can influence perception include: brand, taste, aesthetics, availability, promotion and packaging (Reddy, Yuvaraju & Rao, 2015). Hence, an individual consumer's perception of a soft drink brand can be affected either by personal factors or factors in the brand. Evbayiro-Osagie, Isibor and Ihemefor (2017) opined that an understanding of selection criteria is crucial for organizations interested in attracting and retaining customers.

While much has been done with respect to consumers' perception and preference of soft drinks in other countries (Cullen & Zakeri, 2004; Bere, Sorli, Te Velde & Kleep 2007; Elfhag, Tynelius & Rasmussen, 2007; Burge & Stice 2014; Costa, Hayley & Miller 2014), there seems to be a dearth of empirical studies as it relates to the subject matter in the Nigerian context. The specific objectives of this study are as follows:

1. To find out the most preferred soft drink brands among consumers in Benin City?
2. To ascertain factors that consumers consider when selecting a soft drink brand to purchase?
3. To find out customers' level of satisfaction with selected soft drink brands?
4. To determine whether the level of customers' consumption of soft drinks varies with selected demographic variables (age, gender, marital status, education)?

Literature Review

Concept of Consumer Perception

Walters and Bergiel (1989) defined consumer perception as the entire process by which an individual becomes aware of the environment and interprets it so that it will fit into his/her frame of reference of a particular product. They further explained that every perception process involves a person who interprets through the senses events, relations or other things which may be designated as the precept. Consumer perception occurs when sensory receptors receive information about a product via the brain, code and categorizes this information and then assigns meaning to them according to a person's frame of reference (Van, 1991). Understanding the notion of perception is critically important for marketers because it enables them readily determine what influences consumers to buy. Perceptions are unique to individuals. Hence, each individual may have different perception of the same product (Kotler, 2002). This is because the process of recognition, selection, organization and interpretation is a highly individualized process based on each person's needs, values and expectations. Furthermore, individuals act and react on the basis of their perceptions, and not on the basis of objective reality, resulting from their previous experience (Schiffman & Kanuk, 2009).

Role of Consumer Perception in Marketing

Consumers are constantly bombarded with a multitude of sensory stimuli from ever increasing and sophisticated marketing communications. A consumer's decision to purchase a particular product is therefore largely influenced by the interpretation and positive meaning derived from these communication (Kotler, 2002). Consumers' perception is important in marketing because it represents the way consumers view a product or service. Marketers can therefore only influence perception of consumers by understanding their current perception and being familiar with the perceptual process (Kotler, 2002; Lake, 2009). An understanding of this process aids the marketers in designing its product and communications strategy (Solomon, Bamossy, Askegard & Hogg, 2006; Berenbaum & Larkin, 2007).

Determinants of Consumer Perception and Preference for Soft Drinks

As with other components of consumer behaviour, perception and preference are determined by factors internal to the consumer, factors external to the consumer or a combination of these internal and external factors (Egmond & Bruel, 2007). This is because these factors whether qualitative or quantitative solve specific consumer problems or needs and add value to their consumption (Aggarwal, 2004). A major factor that has been found to determine consumer perception, preference and satisfaction is perceived quality (Bedi, 2010; Kassim & Abdullah, 2010 ref in m.sc thesis). Quality is a key market and product differentiator (Baker, 1995). This is because it has been found to play a critical role in retaining and attracting customers (Jensen & Markland, 1996) as well as in gaining competitive advantage (Santos & Matthews, 2001). Perceived quality is quality as viewed by the consumer. It may be positive or negative and forms the basis for making repeat purchase or subsequent purchase decisions (Trehan, 2008). Given the importance of quality in marketing, its conceptualization, relationship to satisfaction and methods for measurement has remained at the centre of marketing research (Isibor & Odia, 2014). Several approaches have therefore been proposed for measuring quality. For instance, the SERVQUAL scale was developed by Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry (1988) for measuring quality as in service offerings. The SERVQUAL scale assesses service quality in terms of customers' perception of tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy of the service/service provider. However, as with many other scales, the SERVQUAL scale is only appropriate for assessing quality in the service context. Assessing a product at the level of its attributes or features has therefore been suggested as the best approach to understanding and measuring quality for a product. This approach offer many practical benefits to consumer researchers and marketing practitioners especially in terms of managing and improving quality (Agbonifoh, Isibor & Okere, 2016; Gray & Dennis, 2010). There is however no comprehensive list of product features as it relates food and drinks. This is because perceived attributes tends to vary among customers and with circumstances (Kariyawasam, Jayasinghe-Mudalige & Weerahewa, 2007). For instance, Caswell (1998) categorized attributes for assessing food quality into food safety, nutrition, sensory/organoleptic, value/functional, process, text/measurement and cues while Munnukka (2008) identified container design, portion size, flavor and color as attributes consumers use for assessing food quality. On their part, Meher, Bulbul and Khaled (2017) identified price, brand image, taste, availability, flavor, advertisement, packaging, size/variety, expire date and ingredients as quality attributes for soft drinks. Given the peculiar nature of the Nigerian soft drink market, we have adopted eight attributes suggested in previous studies (Taste, color, flavor, nutritional benefit derived, price, size, container design, availability/accessibility) and also sought to ascertain if there were other attributes consumers use in assessing the quality of soft drinks.

Methodology

Survey involving the use of a structured questionnaire was adopted for data collection. The population of this study comprises of all the consumers of soft drinks produced by Coca Cola (Coke, Fanta and Sprite) and 7up (7up, Pepsi and Mirinda) bottling companies in Benin City, Edo State, Nigeria. Since a sampling frame does not exist and it is not possible to study the entire population, convenient sampling was adopted. A sample size of four hundred (400) consumers was adopted for the study. These consumers were selected on the basis of convenience from across Benin City to represent the population. Questionnaire was administered to consumers in parks, film houses, schools, stores, markets, restaurants and other public places around the city.

The questionnaires for this study was made up of both open ended and closed ended questions. Some questions used were adopted from Anderson and Sharp (2010), with modifications to suit the research context. Questions measuring level of satisfaction with the various soft drink brands were however developed base on the review of literature. To satisfy content validity, we ensured careful definition of various variables, as well as the scale to be used. For the most part, questions adopted were from already validated instruments. With respect to reliability of the instrument, a pilot study involving fifty (50) respondents was carried out to aid in testing for the reliability of our instrument. Cronbach's alpha values obtained from the pilot study crossed the threshold value of 0.70 indicating that the instrument is reliable (Hair, Black, Babin, & Anderson, 2014).

Result and Discussion

Demographic Profile of Respondents

The study had a one hundred percent (100%) response rate. This was because of the four hundred (400) questionnaires administered, 400 were retrieved. Table 4.1 shows the demographic distribution of the respondents with respect to selected demographic variables.

Table 4.1: Demographic Distribution of Respondents

Variables	Category	Frequency	Percentages (%)
Sex/Gender	Male	185	46.3%
	Female	215	53.8%
	Total	**400**	**100%**
Age	Less than 18 years	27	6.8%
	18-25 years	242	60.5%
	26-30 years	44	11.0%
	31 years and above	87	21.8%
	Total	**400**	**100%**
Highest Educational Qualification	First School Leaving Certificate	50	12.5%
	O' Level	172	43.0%
	Bachelor's Degree	96	24.0%
	Postgraduate	32	8.0%
	Not educated	50	12.5%
	Total	**400**	**100%**
Occupation	Student	253	63.3%
	Worker	64	16.0%
	Business/Trader	43	10.8%
	Self-employed	29	7.3%
	Others/Home Maker	11	2.8%
	Total	**400**	**100%**
Income	Below #20,000	156	39.0%
	#21,000 - #40,000	108	27.0%
	#41,000 - #60,000	72	18.0%
	#61,000 and above	64	16.0%
	Total	**400**	**100%**
Marital Status	Single	253	63.3%
	Married	88	22.0%
	Divorced	9	2.3%
	Widowed	18	4.5%
	Engaged	32	8.0%
	Total	**400**	**100%**

Source: Authors' Fieldwork

Table 4.1 shows that most of the respondents in this study were female (53.8%), between the ages of 18 and 25 years (60.5%), had earned their O'

Level certificate (43.0%) were students (63.3%), earned an income of below ₦20,000 (39%) and were single (63.3%).

Most Preferred Soft Drink Brand

From among the selected soft drink brands (Coke, Fanta, Sprite, 7up, Pepsi and Mirinda) provided in the questionnaire, respondents indicated their preferences by ranking as follows: most preferred (1), second preferred (2), third preferred (3), fourth preferred (4), fifth preferred (5) and least preferred (6). Table 4.2 shows consumers' preference ranking of selected soft drink brands.

Table 4.2: Consumers' Preference Rank of Selected Soft Drink Brands

Soft Drink Brands	No. Of Respondents	1 Most Preferred	2 Second Preferred	3 Third Preferred	4 Fourth Preferred	5 Fifth Preferred	6 Least Preferred	Preference Index
Coke	350	151 43.1%	62 17.7%	42 12.0%	30 8.6%	28 8.0%	37 10.6%	**2.52**
Pepsi	333	40 12.0%	115 34.5%	55 16.5%	48 14.4%	40 12.0%	35 10.5%	**3.11**
Fanta	324	116 35.8%	48 14.8%	62 19.1%	41 12.7%	44 13.6%	13 4.0%	**2.65**
Mirinda	307	29 9.4%	55 17.9%	39 12.7%	84 27.4%	39 12.7%	61 19.9%	**3.76**
Sprite	354	50 14.1%	52 14.7%	106 29.9%	40 11.3%	79 22.3%	27 7.6%	**3.36**
7up	333	19 5.7%	30 9.0%	44 13.2%	75 22.5%	51 15.3%	114 34.2%	**4.35**

Source: Authors' Fieldwork

Given the basis on which respondents were asked to rank, Table 4.2 shows that the lower the value of the preference index, the higher the consumers' preference for that particular brand of soft drink and vice versa. Hence, Coke was ranked as the most preferred soft drink brand (2.52), followed by Fanta (2.65), Pepsi was ranked as the third preferred with preference index of 3.11 while 7up was ranked as the least preferred soft drink brand with preference index of 4.35. This finding supports the report of the Nigerian Beverage Industry News (2017), which observed that Coca Cola products were the most preferred soft drink brands by consumers in Nigeria. This is unlike in the Bangladesh soft drink market where Meher *et al,* (2017) observed that consumers ranked 7up as most preferred followed by Sprite, Coca Cola, Pepsi, Merinda and Fanta.

Factors Consumers consider in selecting a soft drink

From soft drink features identified in the literature review, respondents were asked to select factors they considered in deciding on the soft drink to purchase. Table 4.3 shows respondents' ranking of these factors. Ranking was based on the number of respondents (frequency) who chose the particular factor stated in the questionnaire.

Table 4.3: Ranking of factors considered in selecting a soft drink

S/N	Factors Considered	Frequency	Percentages (%)	Ranking By Consumers
1	Taste	343	85.8%	1st
2	Color	45	11.3%	7th
3	Flavor	155	38.8%	5th
4	Nutritional benefits derived	137	34.3%	6th
5	Price	232	58.1%	2nd
6	Size (Content)	181	45.4%	3rd
7	Container design	35	8.75%	8th
8	Availability/Accessibility	168	42.1%	4th

Source: Authors' Fieldwork

Table 4.3 shows that the top five factors consumers consider in determining the soft drink to purchase are Taste (85.8%), Price (58.1%), Size/Content (45.4%), availability/accessibility (42.1%) and flavor (38.8%). Aside the factors indentified from literature review, respondents were asked to specify any other factor (s) they considered in selecting soft drinks. Compilation is based on content analysis of response obtained. As can be seen from Table 4.4 respondents shows that Weather/Coldness/Temperature/ (35.42%), Content/Gas/Sugar level(16.67%), the brand (8.33%), Mood/Current craving or hunger (8.33%) and State of health/Preservative/Chemical effect (8.33%) were three other most important factors respondents considered in selecting soft drinks.

Table 4.4: Other Factors Considered in Selecting a Soft Drink

S/N	Other Factors Considered	Frequency	Percentages (%)	Ranking By Consumers
1	The Brand	4	8.33%	3rd
2	Coldness/Temperature/Weather	17	35.42%	1st
3	State of Health (Preservative and Chemical effects)	4	8.33%	3rd
4	Preference and Personal interest	3	6.25%	4th
5	Previous Satisfaction (Desire and Experience)	2	4.17%	5th
6	Spouse and family members' taste	2	4.17%	5th
7	Mood (Current craving, hunger or fun)	4	8.33%	3rd
8	Expiring and manufacturing dates	2	4.17%	5th
9	Packaging and General appearance	2	4.17%	5th
10	Content (Gas and Sugar level)	8	16.67%	2nd

Source: *Authors' Fieldwork*

Level of customer satisfaction with selected soft drink brands

Respondents were asked to indicate their level of satisfaction with selected soft drinks based on eight attributes namely: Taste, Color, Flavor, Price, Nutritional benefits, Size (content), Container design and Accessibility/availability.

Table 4.5: Satisfaction level with Coke

Soft drink attributes	N	Satisfaction Index for Coke	Satisfaction Index for Pepsi	Satisfaction Index for Fanta	Satisfaction Index for Mirinda	Satisfaction Index for Sprite	Satisfaction Index for 7up.
Taste	371	3.89	3.55	3.85	3.25	3.75	3.55
Color	371	3.86	3.61	3.77	3.39	3.81	3.59
Flavor	370	3.92	3.58	3.76	3.35	3.77	3.54
Price	371	3.74	3.59	3.61	3.39	3.75	3.61
Nutritional benefits derived	371	3.42	3.27	3.46	3.22	3.74	3.56
Size (Content)	371	3.73	3.66	3.64	3.49	3.69	3.54
Container Design	371	4.02	3.56	3.79	3.41	3.76	3.50
Accessibility/Availability	371	4.28	3.81	3.93	3.46	3.90	3.62
OVERALL SATISFACTION INDEX		**3.86**	**3.58**	**3.73**	**3.37**	**3.77**	**3.56**

Source: Authors' Fieldwork

Result shown in Table 4.5 indicates that respondents were most satisfied with Coke and then Sprite in terms of Taste, Color, Flavor, Size and Accessibility/Availability. Respondents were most satisfied with the pricing of Sprite followed by Coke. In terms of Nutritional benefits, respondents indicated they were most satisfied with that of Sprite followed by 7up. For container design, consumers were most satisfied with that of Coke followed by Fanta. On the whole, respondents satisfaction was greatest for Coke, followed by Sprite and then Fanta. These results were opposite those obtained in the Bangladesh soft drink market where Meher *et al* (2017) found that 7up occupied the topmost favorable position followed by Coca Cola, Pepsi and Sprite.

Level of customer consumption of Soft Drinks

For the selected soft drink brands provided in the questionnaire, respondents were asked to indicate how frequently they consumed their favorite brand and the quantity they consumed. It could be either per day, per week or per month. Table 4.6 shows the quantity (bottles) consumed by respondents.

Table 4.6: Consumption Quantity (Bottles) of Consumers

Category	Quantity Consumed	Frequency	Percentages (%)
Per Day	1	95	85.59%
	2	13	11.71%
	3	3	2.70%
	Total	**111**	**100%**
Per Week	1	50	25.77%
	2	55	28.35%
	3	35	18.04%
	4	21	10.82%
	5	12	6.19%
	6	1	0.52%
	7	16	8.25%
	8	0	0
	9	1	0.52%
	10	2	1.03%
	14	1	0.52%
	Total	**194**	**100%**
Per Month	1	36	37.89
	2	26	27.37%
	3	10	10.53%
	4	8	8.42%
	5	6	6.32%
	6	1	1.05%
	7	1	1.05%
	8	3	3.16%
	9	1	1.05%
	10	3	3.16%
	Total	**95**	**100%**

Source: Author's Fieldwork

From the information provided in Table 4.6, with respect to per day consumption quantity, 95 respondents (85.59%) consumed one bottle. In terms of per week consumption, 50 respondents (25.77%) consumed one bottle, 55 (28.35%) respondents consumed three bottles, while 21 (10.82%) respondents said they consumed four bottles of soft drinks per week. For per month consumption 36 respondents (37.89%) consumed one bottle while 26 (27.37%) respondents reported they consumed two bottles.

Level of Customer Consumption across Demographic Variables

Table 4.7 shows how the average monthly consumption of selected soft drink brands varies across demographic distribution of respondents. Contrary to some other findings that have

Table 4.7: Demographic Distribution versus Level of Consumption

S/N	Variables	Categories	No. Of Respondents	Mean Index	F	P-value	Decision
1	**Gender**	Male	185	2.51	3.732	.054	**Not Significant**
		Female	215	2.17			
		Total	**400**				
2	**Age**	Less than 18 years	27	1.89	19.331	.000	**Significant**
		18-25 years	242	2.14			
		26-30 years	44	2.64			
		31 years and above	87	2.83			
		Total	**400**	**2.33**			
3	**Highest Educational Qualification**	First school leaving certificate	50	2.28	6.967	.000	**Significant**
		O'level	172	2.24			
		Bachelor's degree	96	2.14			
		Postgraduate	32	2.66			
		Not educated	50	2.82			
		Total	**400**	**2.33**			
4	**Occupation**	Student	253	2.13	13.910	.000	**Significant**
		Worker	64	2.86			
		Business/Trader	43	2.60			
		Self-employed	29	2.69			
		Others/Home Maker	11	1.82			
		Total	**400**	**2.33**			
5	**Income**	Below #20,000	156	2.15	6.483	.000	**Significant**
		#21,000-#40,000	108	2.28			
		41,000-#60,000	72	2.65			
		#61,000 and above	64	2.48			
		Total	**400**	**2.33**			
6	**Marital Status**	Single	253	2.16	7.194	.000	**Significant**
		Married	88	2.61			
		Divorced	9	2.89			
		Widowed	18	2.72			
		Engaged	32	2.50			

Source: Author's Fieldwork

suggested gender as the first effective means of differentiation (Volle, 2001), we found there was no significant difference in monthly consumption in terms of gender. In terms of age and level of education, soft drink consumption was higher among younger and less educated consumers. Monthly soft drink consumption was found to also vary with occupation, level of income and marital status. Monthly soft drink consumption was found to be higher amongst students, those in the lower income cadre and singles. This finding has major implications for segmentation, promotion product positioning strategies formulation by soft drink manufacturers.

Conclusion and Recommendations

A consumer’s decision to purchase is not always irrational. It is trite knowledge that consumers also follow a rational process in deciding whether or not to buy. Given the fierceness of competition in the soft drink industry, soft drink manufacturers will only be success in attracting and retaining customers if they know and strategize around factors that are critical to consumers in their soft drink selection process. On the basis of our findings, we recommend as follows:

1. The profiling of respondents revealed that soft drink consumption is higher among younger, less educated, low income-singles who are mostly students. Soft drink manufacturers interested in growing their market share must therefore adopt marketing strategies suitable for capturing this segment of the soft market.
2. Product positioning strategy must be built around taste, price, size, availability (distribution method) and flavors that are attractive to the identified segment. Since the high consumption segment is mostly made up of younger-low income-students, taste and flavour must be sweet, pleasurable and varied. Drink size (content) should also be such that will be perceived as delivering value for money.
3. Respondents mentioned weather/coldness/temperature as a major consideration in determining the soft drink to purchase. Soft drink manufacturers must therefore show innovation in terms of package (container) used. They should design and use packaging materials that can keep content at optimum temperature for a long time.
4. Since soft drinks will continue to form part of beverages that consumers purchase on a daily basis, there is the need for further studies in this area. This study focused majorly on how factors internal to a soft drink brand affect consumers’ choice. Literature also

suggests that apart from factors internal to a brand, brand choice is also affected by factors within the individual. Therefore, gaining a thorough understanding of soft drink selection criteria requires more studies aimed at empirically examining how personal, psychological and environmental factors affect a consumer's choice of a soft drink brand.

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