

From Strangers to Networks? How Relational Trust Impact Brands in Online Community

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Abstract: The proliferation of brands in the market and the attendant disconnection presents significant challenges for decision makers. The usefulness of online communities is growing globally but the potentials remain inadequately harnessed in developing countries. Marketing strategists are exploring various strategies to enhance consumer relationships and brand trust through online communities. Unfortunately, few studies have focused on the impact of online communities, particularly in Nigeria. This study examined how online communities, and relational trust can influence brand choice and familiarity in Nigeria. Cross sectional survey was conducted. Sample of 164 was used while summary statistics, logit regression and correlation analysis were used to analyze the data. The findings established a nexus between relational trust and brand familiarity, brand choice, and brand differentiation, highlighting the significant influence of online communities on brand perception. Furthermore, age, recommendations, content, rewards, and quality of information significantly impact consumers' decisions to join online communities. This study provides insights into the operations of multilevel marketing firms operating in emerging digital space and emphasizes the need for businesses to leverage on the interconnectedness of online communities to build profitable relationships and trust in their brands given its influence to foster trust and long-term customer relationship. The implication is for firms to invest in online communities' management to foster trust and improve consumer perception, especially in markets where traditional advertising is less effective.

Keywords: Brand, brand perception, online community, relational trust

Introduction

Brand perception play a crucial role in consumer decision making and shapes how consumers evaluate companies and their brands (Kotler and Armstrong, 2010). Most times, consumers select brands that connects with their personal identity (Friederichsen, 2013) and aligns with cultural perception. In African markets, branding strategies are influenced by the convergence of factors including price sensitivity, cultural perception and limited access to formal advertising (Adegbite and Nwankwo, 2020). Understanding the influence of branding is the subject matter that have continued to pique interest of researchers. While previous studies on branding in Africa have examined issues of brand loyalty, consumer trust and word of mouth marketing (Ncube and Madiche, 2021). Understanding brand perception is essential for developing effective marketing strategies (Bhatt and Jain, 2017), as it helps companies to connect with consumers on a deeper level. As a result, consumers quickly relate to a brand based on the need the brand serves (Kotler and Armstrong, 2010), emotional appeal, experience, and associations (Aiswarya and Krishnan, 2019). These elements are strategic in marketing strategy (Bhatt and Jain, 2017). Recently, markets in Nigeria have witnessed proliferation of brands. As a result, there is a growing disconnect between consumers and brands such as in fashion (Joseph, 2023), between brand advertiser and consumers (Augustine and Brand Communication, 2021) which poses a significant challenge for decision-makers due to its influence on consumer brand choice and purchase decision (Uzochukwu and Nwankwo, 2020), customer loyalty (Olufemi and Osuagwu, 2022), and marketing strategy (Akindele and Adeyemo, 2019). These realities underscore the need for companies to reevaluate their brand-building strategies, placing a stronger emphasis on brand trust and customer relationships (Mutuku et al., 2016; Olufemi and Osuagwu, 2022).

Brand trust is a cognitive factor that can evoke emotional responses from consumers (Casalo et

al., 2021; Kabadayi and Alan, 2021). It reflects a consumer's willingness to rely on a brand's promises (Chaudhuri and Holbrook, 2023). Research has shown that brand trust is crucial for fostering brand loyalty, particularly in high-service markets (Sahin et al., 2020; Chiou and Droge, 2022) and play a vital role in shaping customer relationships with brands (Urban et al., 2020). Trust is a concept that evolves with time particularly in interpersonal relationships. It is underdeveloped and remains somewhat ambiguous (Luhmann, 2020). This gap has led scholars to advocate for a more defined conceptual framework of trust, recognizing it as a dynamic force informed by sociological theories (Gambetta, 2021). Trust is not only shaped by reason or knowledge but also influenced by regulated interactions within stable social systems (Bachmann et al., 2020), the familiarity gained through lived social experiences (Slade and Sweeney, 2022), feelings of self-confidence and self-efficacy (Hosmer, 2021). These elements play a significant role in shaping consumer behavior (Sweeney and Lichtenstein, 2023). In other word, trust is derived from social relationships (Harrison and Seidel, 2021). It is context-dependent with specific situations that can either enhance or diminish it (McEvily and Tortoriello, 2021), and factors leading to its violations (Lewicki & Tomlinson, 2021). However, the literature on relational trust underscores its influence by individual factors and the evolving dynamics of social relationships thereby emphasizing the complexity and multifaceted nature of trust in relational contexts (Mayer and Davis, 2022). Relational trust is developed through social interactions (Whitener et al., 2022) and community networks (Sztompka, 2020). Recent studies highlighted that more than 50% of consumers will abandon brands that fail to deliver on their commitments to brand promise (Edelman, 2024). Thus, cultivating brand trust is essential for businesses seeking to strengthen their connections with consumers and enhance brand loyalty. One way to achieve this connection is leveraging on the connectedness of customers

using online communities to share word of mouth and connect with brands (Smith, 2014).

An online community is a group of consumers who meet and interact with shared interests by using a common mechanism to achieve personal and shared goals (Dholakia et al. 2004). It serves as a communication platform where consumers share product experiences, benefits, and influence purchasing decisions. Evidence shows that such group interaction helps build brand credibility, especially in markets where traditional advertising is less effective (Wang et al., 2021) such as in the toothpaste market where customer experience is more valid than advertising. Online communities leveraging on the connectedness of social media is one effective way to build social relations and enhance brand recognition (Zhang and Liu, 2023). Marketers leverage these platforms to foster deeper customer relationships (Chaffey, 2022) and identify new business opportunities (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2020) due to their potential to influence customer loyalty (Hollebeek et al., 2022) and stimulation of online recommendations. Online communities facilitate the interactive engagement of individuals within a virtual space (Kietzmann et al., 2020), with trust being a critical factor for success and individual commitment (Eisenbeiss et al., 2021). Consequently, these platforms play a crucial role in shaping relationships and influencing brand perceptions (Järvinen and Taiminen, 2022). As a result, multilevel marketing companies, have leveraged this platform to strengthen their brand presence (Tao et al., 2023) and build consumer trust (Huang and Wei, 2021) particularly for the toothpaste market in Nigeria.

The toothpaste market in Nigeria is highly competitive, dominated by well-established multinational and local brands. This can be evidenced with the introduction of Longrich toothpaste by the company following significant trust challenges it contented with using unconventional multilevel marketing (MLM) strategy instead of traditional advertising. Unlike established brands that rely on mass media, the brand was marketed using peer

recommendations, online community engagement, and direct selling to build consumer trust. However, this unfamiliar approach led to consumer skepticism, with concerns over product authenticity, efficacy, and differentiation from existing brands. This uncertainty created confusion about brand perception, making trust a key determinant in accepting the products that are marketed through such means. For instance, Agbonkhese and Aganbi (2016) queried its workability in translating to sales and affluence for the practitioners while Osifo and Enofe (2021) revealed that the scheme poses managerial challenges, increases pressure on marketers and is affected by low patronage. However, the rising global competition for consumer wallet is leading companies to resort to unconventional schemes such that Oladele and Laosebikan (2019) consider the scheme as a paradigm shift to conventional advertising. In the past, such schemes have been considered to be polemic (Aggarwal and Kumar, 2014) and least understood (Failla, 1996) while recently it has been cumbered with trust issues. However, trust issues have emerged as a barrier to purchasing toothpaste in the Nigerian market as well as dietary products (Osifo and Enofe, 2021) although a recent study of the scheme on health products by Oloveze et al., (2021) revealed the scheme has significant effects. Given the emerging resort of companies to utilize the digital space, attention is shifting to online strategies. More customers tend to resort to online approaches (Oloveze et al., 2022) while online communities tend to be ignored on account of trust and poor perception of value (Casalo et al., 2008). Despite the evidence of consumer shifts, there are limited studies on how online communities influence trust in African consumer markets. This study investigates how engagement in online communities affects brand perception and trust in consumer products such as toothpaste products while seeking to provide insights into digital trust-building strategies in emerging markets. The objective is to identify the factors influencing consumer decisions to join an online community, examine how online communities contribute to relational trust and influence brand

perception; and assess the role of online community participation in shaping brand loyalty and purchase decision. While existing research has examined brand trust and digital consumer engagement in developed economies (Choi and Lee, 2023), studies on brand trust and consumer engagement in Africa is limited, and few have explored the dynamic of online communities in Africa despite investment in digital brand engagement in an evolving digital environment. Previous studies have focused on traditional advertising and word-of-mouth. With increasing demand and benefits of connectedness of the digital space, it becomes critical to examine digital online communities as a trust transfer mechanism and its impact in advancing brand trust and perception.

Review of Literature

The subject matter of trust and impact on brands has continued to pique the interest of marketing experts due to the central role of trust in modifying consumer perception and relationship with brands. The concomitant realization is that relational trust is built through continuous interactions and open communication and association between consumers and brands (Möllering, 2013). Diverse benefits result from such interactions in online communities including brand credibility and consumer engagement (Brodie et al., 2019). This is because of the value consumer places on personal experience through peer recommendations, social proof, and brand transparency (Sichtmann and Diamantopoulos, 2021), which is common in digital environment. These platforms have transformed consumer-brand relationships. They serve as vehicles for information exchange, emotional support, and brand advocacy (Kozinets et al., 2022). Research indicates that participation in online brand communities strengthens consumer trust and brand loyalty (Dessart, 2020). The strength of personal shared experiences and recommendations within these communities helps to shape purchasing decisions (Wang et al., 2021). In emerging markets, such as Nigeria, emerging discourse reveal that online

communities can offer an alternative means of engaging with brands and building relational trust (Okonkwo et al., 2023).

Online communities help to enhance brand familiarity, which promotes consumer trust and reduces perceived risk in purchasing decisions (Ebrahim, 2020). This amplifies consumer capabilities to differentiate brands especially in already saturated markets where brands must create unique value propositions to gain consumer trust (Gielens and Steenkamp, 2019). Studies suggest that consumers are more likely to trust and choose brands that consistently communicate their unique value and maintain strong online engagement (Bianchi et al., 2021). As a result, relational trust is now considered a strategic asset for brands (Choi and Lee, 2023). Trust-driven brand engagement leads to long-term customer retention and advocacy (Hollebeek et al., 2022). In online communities, perceived trustworthiness directly influences brand preference and word-of-mouth recommendations (Islam et al., 2021).

Discussions surrounding relational trust, brand perception and online communities follow a sequence of human behavior that can best be explained using the Trust Transfer Theory (TTT) (Stewart, 2003) and Social Exchange Theory (SET) (Blau, 1964). These theories offer insights into how trust is transferred from one entity such as an online group to another and how such interaction particularly between individuals or organizations are based on reciprocal benefits. These theories were considered because they highlight the basic behavioral act that explains human actions and motivations while also being instrumental in explaining consumer perception of value in online community interactions. Also, it provides insight into group dynamics and human behavior that is driven by ends and means. In alignment with this study, trust developed within an online community influences consumers' trust in brand because previous research suggests that online peer recommendations play a significant role in shaping brand trust, particularly in the absence

of direct brand experience (Wang et al., 2021). Online communities serve as platforms where consumers exchange product information, reviews, and experiences, fostering trust through shared knowledge (Brodie et al., 2019).

Brand familiarity: Brand familiarity is established in extant literature as an indicator of like (Chaiken, 1979) or trust (Petty et al., 1983) and can create a ground between customers to engage in social interaction (Aditya, 2014). It is the number of experiences associated with a product that a consumer accumulates (Saini, 2015), while the confidence in purchasing a brand is dependent on the level of consumers' information on the brand. It deals with prior knowledge of the consumer, contact, and experience with the brand, as brand familiarity increases with more contact with the brand (Buil et al., 2013). This leads to higher trust or similar levels in the brand (Chinomona and Maziriri, 2017).

Brand differentiation: Brand differentiation is associated with attributes that are either trivial or meaningless, but capable of leading to differentiation. These attributes include consumer involvement which can lead to trust that elicits action, brand association (Till et al., 2011), and brand personality (Rauschnabel et al., 2016). Brand differentiation has been established in extant literature as a distinguishing feature among top brands (Tesser, 2015), as it can build a top brand, given that contemporary consumers are willing to trust differentiated quality brands (Coelho and Henseler, 2012), while a lack of brand differentiation is capable of producing poor brand loyalty, poor brand preference, and purchase intention (Krystallis, 2013). However, trust is capable of leading to commitment, loyalty, and building relationships (Liao, 2015). Differentiated brands with higher trust have greater effects on sales, revenue, and market share.

Brand choice: Brand choice is a behavioral aspect of consumer behavior related to decisions regarding brands and their purchases (Danish et al., 2019), including selection and consumption. This is a consequence of consumers' knowledge

and experiences with the brand (Jain and Madan, 2015), although the process of making decisions on and selecting a brand is complex (Sultana, 2015). Interestingly, it reflects consumer experience with a brand (Kotler and Armstrong, 2010) and includes a set of observable and unobservable traits that influence consumer decision. The implication is that inconsistencies still occur in consumers' brand choices, especially in imperfect markets (Sultana, 2015). While these inconsistencies exist, trust has been established in extant literature as a vital part in establishing consumer-brand relationships (Urban et al., 2000) and building brand loyalty (Kabadayi and Alan, 2012). This is hypothesized to influence consumers' choice. Trust deals with consumers' reliance on a brand's ability to perform its stated function (Wang et al., 2021). Trust is also expected to impact brand choice, especially where there is consistency in keeping brand promises.

Online community: An online community is a group of consumers who meet and interact with shared interests by using a common mechanism to achieve personal and shared goals (Dholakia et al. 2004). This is notable for their knowledge-sharing ability (Gruen et al. 2006). Online communities offer consumers the opportunity to search for information (Jepsen, 2006) and compare information about brands (Srinivasan et al., 2002) following open unstructured conversations that indicate community members' critique of a brand, their likes, dislikes, concerns, emotions, and attitudes toward brands (Ridings et al. 2002). This is one of the bases for the trust-building ability of online communities, as consumers with similar interests and shared goals identify themselves in the community and build cohesion thereby facilitating and enhancing trust-building. Essentially, there is a greater chance of building trust in a brand when people associate within an online community (Tung et al., 2001). Thus, a key part of the online community is the development of trust between an individual and a group of strangers, leading to the provision of feedback (Ridings et al. 2002). In relation to brand, there is consumer expectation for the brand to act in the position of information provided and shared by

users (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2010). This situation causes consumers to trust a brand when they join the community (Porter and Donthu, 2008) and subsequently influencing their trust in the community.

Objectives of the Study

1. To investigate how brand familiarity with multilevel marketed brand is related to relational trust
2. To determine the effect of brand differentiation of multilevel marketed brands on relational trust
3. To analyse how brand choice of multilevel marketed brand is related to relational trust
4. To ascertain how participation in online community influence relational trust in brand choice

Hypotheses of the Research Work

1. Brand familiarity with multilevel marketed brand is positively related to relational trust
2. Brand differentiation of multilevel marketed brands is positively related to relational trust
3. Brand choice of multilevel marketed brand is positively related to relational trust.
4. Participation in an online community significantly influences relational trust in brand choice

Research Method

The population of online community members at the time of the study was unknown, leading to the adoption of the Cochran's approach to determine the sample size. A pilot test was conducted to estimate the proportion of attributes in the population, and the researchers got a value of 0.85. A 5% allowable error and a

95% confidence level with 5% precision were used.

$$n_o = \frac{Z^2 P \times Q}{e^2} = \frac{(1.96)^2 (0.85) \times (0.15)}{0.05^2} = \frac{0.489804}{0.0025} = 195.9216 = 196$$

An online survey was conducted using structured questionnaire. 196 online community members in Nigeria participated in the survey by invitation using invitation link. The members constitute users that have trialed differentiated multilevel marketed consumer brands such as toothpaste brands. An invitation to participate in survey contained an explanatory text, a statement of confidential treatment, a guarantee of anonymous respondents, and a link to the questionnaire to enable them to access the questionnaire and share to other members. Thus, the sampling followed purposive and snowball sampling. However, the online questionnaire included a screening questionnaire which is specifically on belonging to online community and trying multilevel marketed brands such as Longrich toothpaste brand in Nigeria. After screening the questionnaires for appropriateness, 164 valid copies were appropriate and used for analysis.

The items were validated following the recommendation of Taherdoost (2016) on content validity. The statistical approach requires using panel experts and validating the instrument using the outcome of the test. 10 panel experts were used to scale the acceptability and appropriateness of the instrument using essential, essential but not appropriate, and not essential. The derived value of 0.6 from the essential inputs of eight panel experts out of 10 experts in the field validates the instrument, as Lawshe (1975) asserts 0.5 value as the minimum reference. The reliability was determined using Cronbach's alpha. Hair et al., (2010) recommends minimum requirement of 0.7. The outcome of alpha score of 0.75 satisfies this threshold.

Pearson's correlation coefficient was used to analyze the direction and strength of the relationships between the variables. Regression analysis was carried out on the effect of the online community on relational trust to brand choice. Binary logit was used to ascertain the predictor's odd values, following their categorical nature. The explicit forms of these statistical approaches are as follows:

For correlational association between variables:

$$r = \frac{Nxy - (\sum x)(\sum y)}{\sqrt{[N(x)^2 - (\sum X)^2][N(y)^2 - (\sum y^2)]}} \quad \text{.....i.}$$

Where r = Pearson Correlation Coefficient.

X = independent variable in the study

Y = dependent variable in the study

n = sample size.

Σ = Summation sign.

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

$$Y = b_0 + b_1\chi_1 + e \quad \text{.....ii.}$$

Where:

Y = Online community

b_0 = Constant

χ_1 = Relational trust on brand choice

e = error term

To identify the determinants of consumer decision to join online community, logit regression that was used is given as:

$$\pi(X) = \frac{1}{1 + e^{X\beta}}$$

The logistic regression model has a linear form for the logit of this probability.

$$\text{Logit} \{ (X) \} = \log \frac{\pi(Y)}{1 - \pi(Y)} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 X_1 + \beta_2 X_2 + \dots + \beta_n X_n$$

The simplified version is given as:

$$Y = \beta_1 X_1 + \beta_2 X_2 + \beta_3 X_3 + \beta_4 X_4 + \beta_5 X_5 + \beta_6 X_6 + \beta_7 X_7 + \beta_8 X_8 + \beta_9 X_9 + \beta_{10} X_{10} + \mu \quad \text{.....iii.}$$

Where:

Y = Decision to participate in online community platform (Dummy: 1= decision to participate, 0= not to participate)

X_1 = Sex (male=1, female=0).

X_2 = Age (years).

X_3 = Education (years).

X_4 = Income (naira)

X_5 = Recommendation (yes=1, no=0).

X_6 = Content (high, medium, low).

X_7 = Reward (opinion).

X_8 = Networking (active=1, passive=0)

X_9 = Quality of information (High=1, Low=0)

X_{10} = Interaction (High, Medium, Low)

μ = Residual variable.

Analysis & Results

The association between brand familiarity and relational trust is confirmed although the result on Table 1 indicates a significantly weak positive relationship at 2-tailed test. However, it strongly emphasized the notion of relational trust in brand familiarity through online community. This finding implies that brand knowledge increases brand familiarity. According to Wang and Tai (2011), an

online community requires trust among its members. It is this trust in the online community that drives brand familiarity, which, according to Huang and Wei (2021), is manifested in prior knowledge, contact, and experiences, and internal subjective responses that are felt upon experiencing a brand (Brakus et al., 2009). Brands are maintained through experience and not

necessarily through advertising, as advertisement and communication can enhance brand familiarity and not necessarily brand conviction (Kotler and Armstrong, 2010). This result corroborates the research of Chinomona and Maziriri (2017) on brand familiarity and brand attachment following the link between trust and brand attachment in the study.

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

		Relational trust	Brand familiarity
Relational trust	Pearson correlation	1	.368**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	164	164
Brand familiarity	Pearson correlation	.368**	
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	164	164

Source: *Field survey*. Note: **Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

Also, brand differentiation is revealed to be significantly related to relational trust as indicated on Table 2 although the relationship shows a significantly weak positive relationship between relational trust and brand differentiation at 2-tailed test. The implication is that changes in both variables go in the same direction. Therefore, as brands differentiation increases, relational trust

also increases. This finding substantiates the assertions of Coelho and Henseler (2012) that differentiated brands can attract consumers' willingness to trust them. This is because customers tend to identify the unique value of each brands and spot the benefits they sought and can derive from consumption of a differentiated brand.

Table 2: Outcome of hypothesis: brand differentiation and relational trust

		Relational trust	Brand differentiation
Relational trust	Pearson correlation	1	.454**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	164	164
Brand differentiation	Pearson correlation	.454**	
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	164	164

Source: *Field survey*. Note: **Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

Brand choice and relational trust are related as the result on Table 3 show a significantly weak positive relationship between relational trust and brand choice at 2-tailed test. This result has implications for brand strategists and highlights that brand choice and selection tell a story about the success or failure of a brand. This finding supports Delgado et al. (2003) finding of the relationship between trust and brand choice,

particularly where there is consistency in keeping promise to the brand value in all circumstances. The implication of this finding is that experiences shared through online communities can increase trust, which results in positive brand choice because trust features prominently in consumer decision-making, which comes through brand experience and knowledge. This is more significant, given the complexity and inconsistencies involved in consumer choices.

Table 3: Outcome of hypothesis: brand choice and relational trust

		Relational trust	Brand choice
Relational trust	Pearson correlation	1	.314**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	164	164
Brand choice	Pearson correlation	.314**	
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	164	164

Source: *Field survey*. Note: **Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

The connection between online community and relational trust on brand choice is confirmed on Table 4. Although the R^2 value show weak variance in the model yet studies reveal that R^2 values should be from 0.1 (Falk and Miller, 1992) therefore, the model's R^2 (.109) validate the model. The result is significant thereby confirming online community as one of the ways in which businesses build and enhance relationships with consumers and brand recognition. Brand recognition manifests as positive brand choices and recommendation effects (Kotler and Armstrong, 2010). The results show a positive

effect of online community relational trust on brand choice. The implication of the result buttresses the power of the online community in relational trust development towards a brand. Thus, there is a greater opportunity for trust building in a brand and choice making in the case of consumers with similar interests located in a given community. This occurs following the online community's ability to form a member's relational trust in a brand. This result corroborates the findings of Tung et al. (2001) and Ridings et al. (2002).

Variables	B	Standard error	t-values
Constant	.035	.409	.084
Relational trust	.590	.132	4.459***
R^2	.109		
F-ratio	19.883***		

Source: *Field survey*. Note: *** denoted significant at 1% confidence level

The analysis in Table 5 shows the probability of decisions being influenced to joined online community. The Nagelkerke R^2 is above 0.1 thereby indicating sufficient validity of the model. Also, the significance of Hosmer and Lemeshow test further attests to the validity of the model. The significant result confirms the model to be satisfactory in estimating the factors that influence people in deciding to join online community. Out of the 9 variables, 6 variables were significant. The coefficients of sex, age, recommendation, contents, rewards, and quality of information were significant at various levels of confidence, as represented by the Wald statistics, thus indicating a relationship with the decision to participate or join online communities.

The significant result of sex implies that males are more favorably disposed to join online communities than females; however, this does not invalidate the valuable contributions of their female counterparts to shared information. The male decision to join may be more than just for social factors but may include economic and other issues that may assist them in advancing their welfare. From the significant result on age, an increase in age leads to a corresponding increase in the desire to join an online community. This result is consistent with the findings of Burmeister (2012), who observed that younger populations are involved in online communities in many countries. In addition, knowledge is power, and there is an expectation that the elderly

will be a base and/or fountain of knowledge. According to Pfeil et al. (2009), older adults use online communities for social interactions and engage in online communities to share information. The significant result for recommendations is consistent with prior expectations. Recommendations can come from several sources, but the most credible and trustworthy sources are family, friends, and colleagues. According to Kapadia (2019), about 92% of people, between 18-34 years, seek recommendations from friends and family when considering a product purchase. This provides word-of-mouth recommendations with a good rating as a source of trustworthiness. This result is consistent with Marketing Charts (2013), who showed that recommendation play a significant role in the decision to participate in an online community. For content, a 99% confidence level implies a direct relationship with the decision to join an online community. Content quality enhances interactivity. This view was also expressed by Lu and Lee (2010), who found that more females considered the quality of content before engaging in an online community. The issue of content becomes necessary to challenges of bias and fake news, which is a major concern among policymakers worldwide and a rising concern among Nigerians from content creators especially on the veracity of information. The implication of this result is that to gainfully

engage consumers/prospects, marketing practitioners must ensure that contents emanating from their online community are devoid of bias or fake information. It is necessary to monitor, filter, and remove biased content from time to time. With respect to rewards, a 1% confidence level implies that rewards influence people's desire to join online communities. This is in line with a priori expectations. Naturally, people tend to be part of a social system in which they are rewarded periodically. Literature evidence such as Oloveze et al., (2022) shows that multilevel network marketing models on brands such as the Longrich and health products has a reward system that serves as an incentive for people to join their businesses and online communities. However, the quality of information is significant and positive at the 10% confidence level, thus buttressing it as a motivation to join the online community. The value of information, according to Treacy and Wiersema (1993), is best accessed from the point of quality and price attached to such information. Consumers are naturally attracted to higher quality because it results in overall customer satisfaction (Kotler and Armstrong, 2010). Jang et al. (2008) indicated that information quality influences community commitment and brand awareness (Barreda et al., 2015). Essentially, the quality associated with information from online communities improves interaction and communication (Ayodele et al., 2017).

Table 5 Binary logit estimates of factors influencing decision to join online community.

Variables	Co-efficient (B)	Standard error	Wald	Exp (B)
Constant	-5.325	1.610	10.942	.000***
Sex	-.612	.425	2.081	.542**
Age	.073	.027	7.457	1.075***
Education	-.021	.075	.082	.979
Income	.000	.000	.235	1.000
Recommendation	.400	.212	3.574	1.492***
Contents	.977	.374	6.804	2.655***
Rewards	1.196	.496	5.811	3.308***
Quality of information	.240	.189	1.611	1.272*
Interaction	.040	.266	.023	1.041
Cox-snell R ²	.343			
Nagelkerke R ²	.457			
Hosmer and Lemeshow test (X ²)	8.249***			

Source: *Field survey*. Note: ***, ** and * denoted significance at 1%, 5%, and 10% level respectively.

Conclusion and Implications

This study investigates the trust on brand perception in an online community. Recently, the online community has become a platform for sharing information and interconnectedness between businesses and other engagements. This study provides evidence of a mutually satisfying relationship between relational trust and brand familiarity, brand differentiation, and brand choice. Interestingly, it provides evidence on the influence of online communities as a veritable tool for enhancing brand trust, especially in a competitive market. Therefore, by leveraging consumer interactions within their online communities, firms can promote brand differentiation, increase brand familiarity and build stronger relationships between consumers and brands. Further evidence concludes that age, sex, recommendation, content, quality of information, and reward systems are related factors that drive people to participate in online communities. Overall, relational trust is an important attribute in consumer purchase decisions. Firms need to ensure that their brand delivers its promise because promises improve trust and brand choice. However, it is vital to gauge against unrealistic promises. Rather, by promising less but delivering more than the promise, a firm can retain consumers' trust in the brand. There is a need to increase awareness of the online community as more than just a platform for sharing information. It is important to increase interactivity and connectedness. This is important in building an army of loyal customers and driving female consumers' interest in joining the platform who happen to be the more active members. In addition, it is more pronounced in brand familiarity, given that when a consumer has good experience with a product, it will make them loyal to the brand and will likely end up joining and talking about it in an online community. Therefore, this study provides insights on the major intrinsic value that drives demand and loyalty for products.

Practical Implication

This finding relates to multilevel networking firms in Nigeria with online communities. The exclusive Nigerian sample provides vital insight on the operations of brands in emerging economies in Africa as they drive towards reaching customers and building trust in their brands. Therefore, this study clearly emphasizes the need for firms to invest in online communities' management to foster trust and improve consumer perception, especially in markets where traditional advertising is less effective.

This study provides empirical insight from an African context, addressing a significant gap in branding and brand management, and also consumer trust research. Management effort must be geared toward the development of strategies to harness vital information that benefits decisions which will engender relational trust. Our study relates to the growing importance of trust-based connection. This is very critical to business growth in time of uncertainty as we currently experience with businesses in Nigeria. Evidentially, online communities and engagement can provide firms with strategic support and insight that will help tailor firms' solution that differentiates their market offerings. Strong brand equity is possible with online community and peer engagement because of the increase in trust and preference. From the result, and Nigeria's context, reliance on online community for any consumer product such as Longrich toothpaste and other multilevel marketed consumer brand justifies the vital role of digital peer trust in brand equity formation.

The study offers insight to further studies. We acknowledge that there are diverse reasons for joining an online community, which may not be entirely to build trust. In this regard, this study calls for a focus on relationship building following its positive association with brand familiarity, differentiation, and choice. Also, we suggest exploration of longitudinal effects of online community on trust building.

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