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EFFECT OF WORD OF MOUTH ON ORGANIZATIONAL PERFORMANCE: A STUDY OF DELTA STATE MARITIME POLYTECHNIC, BURUTU

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Abstract
Marketing activities are a form of investment to improve customer loyalties. The use of word-of-mouth WOM has taken the place of the traditional marketing channel, and firms are placing more efforts on referral and social media. This study aimed to explore the effects of referral on student patronage behaviour and how social media influence student patronage behaviour toward Delta State Maritime Polytechnic, Burutu. This study is survey-based research because it uses a questionnaire to obtain data from a representative sample of a large population to make inferences about the population. We adopted the convenience sampling technique. The researcher administered a structured questionnaire to respondents to obtain the data required. The research questionnaire had a 5-point Likert scale design. The data analysis revealed that the relationship between referral and social media and student's patronage behaviour is a direct and positive one. The following were recommended: organization should put an emphasis on creating unforgettable experiences in order to increase student's loyalty because satisfied students are more likely to refer the institution to others. Organization should make an investment in excellent in-person contacts with students in order to make a lasting impact and foster an environment that inspires them to talk about their satisfying experiences. Lastly, by continuously surpassing student's expectations and converting happy students into ardent supporters.

Keywords: word of mouth; Referral; social media; Organization Performance; customer's patronage Behaviour

Introduction

Communication has been part and parcel of human existence since the creation of man. Man shares ideas, experiences, perspectives, encounters, differences and to develop casual correspondence with another. Word-of-mouth (WOM) is one of the main strategies of marketing institutions, in which based on its term, WOM is communication in the form of discussions and testimonials from people talking about products and services. From this understanding, it can be deduced that public conversation about the product or service that is being communicated is very important. If the product or service produced is good, then the sense of trust increases and makes the purchase intention very significant. This is in line with the idea from which states that the WOM variable affected consumer purchase intention, where purchase intention could arise due to word of mouth as measured by reference group indicators (family, close friends, and acquaintances).

Over the years, it has become extremely difficult for some businesses in the education sector especially the Polytechnic to maintain their present clients (students) admission as they continue to switch from

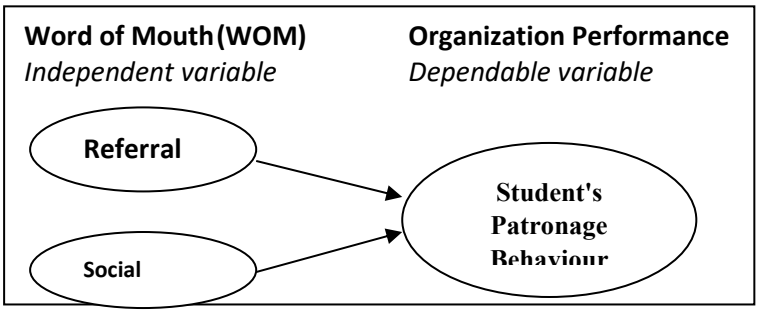
one polytechnic to university as competition in the sector grows owing to the BSc/HND dichotomy. Institutions have therefore turned to cutting their entire operational costs. Word-of-mouth is one such strategy for lowering their overall costs while insuring the retention of their current clientele. This strategy has caused marketers to switch from a long-term relational focus to a short-term transaction focus approach. The assertion is that businesses today will only be successful if the majority of the general public is aware of their product offers and be satisfactory of the product or service.

The harsh realities we have to face is that, institutions need to be creative and innovative through WOM to enable consumers (potential candidates) make positive purchase (admission) decisions among competing alternatives, recognizing that consumers do not just buy products or services, they buy utilities, they buy solutions, they buy benefits, they buy confidence. Whenever satisfaction is achieved, the consumers become the organisation's or institution's best sales representative telling others about the product or service through WOM.

Historically, Word-of-Mouth (WOM) has been a very important and effective kind of communication and it has also shown to be a very efficient marketing technique (Ahmad, Yaseen, Khan, & Adnan, 2021). WOM has grown in significance in recent years in terms of communication for two reasons: first, it is one of the best types of advertising for enhancing brand awareness, loyalty, and sales. Second, a revolution in information and communications technology that reduces the distance between people in both space and time has increased WOM's influence at the same time (Afthanorhan, Awang, & Aimran, 2020). WOM is an oral, one-on-one interaction involving a brand, product, or service that takes place between a communicator and a recipient and is seen by the recipient as non-commercial. A business or institution communicates with its potential clients or target market in order to effectively sell its goods and services. Lack of or poor communication will probably cause the market to be unaware of the company's goods and services. Every action a firm takes is considered to be a type of market communication in some way. Marketing communication is the term used to describe this process of communication between businesses and consumers (Agarwal, Mehrotram, & Misra, 2022). The WOM marketing approach helps in the communication message that travels from the customer to the business. Business executives and marketing experts concur that WOM-driven consumer interactions have a significant impact on customers' retention (Al-Hazmi, 2021). Businesses utilize WOM in an effort to catch consumers' attention, increase brand and product awareness, and persuade consumers to buy their goods and services. WOM is thought to have an impact on up to 80% of total customer retention (Alshurideh & Al Kurdi, 2020). The comeback of WOM has highlighted the need for businesses to be more thoroughly comprehend WOM and its causes. The market shift from mass communication to interpersonal communication, as well as the growing importance of digital media in marketing communications, has all contributed to this. WOM may be honed and fueled like any other marketing activity, thus it's critical for businesses to be aware of the marketing channels and media that can fuel it (Alkitbi, Alshurideh, Al Kurdi & Salloum, 2020). The purpose of this article is to provide institutions with an understanding and relevance of word-of-mouth marketing and its potential value to the existentiality of organisation.

Literature Review

Fig. 1 Conceptual Framework



Source: Authors' conceptualization. (2026)

Word of Mouth

Purnamabroto, Susanti & Cempera (2022) explained that the word-of-mouth information comes directly from consumers who describe personally their own experience when using a product, so this is much clearer for consumers than the information contained in the advertisement. Word Of Mouth (WOM) refers to the exchange of messages, perceptions, responses, and ideas between consumers. Word of mouth (WOM) is oral communication that involves the customer so that the customer chooses to talk to others about products, services, and brands (Kotler & Keller, 2016). Islam (2020) reveal that Word of Mouth Communication refers to the exchange of comments, thoughts, or ideas of ideas among two or more consumers, none of which is a source of marketing. Word of Mouth can arise from having people posting messages who don't care about generating product acceptance/purchases behavior among consumers/readers (Anastasiei et al., 2020). Word-of-mouth communication can trigger consumers in making purchase decisions. This is consistent with Anastasiei et al. (2022) research which states People will act on reliable recommendations.

Glory, et al. (2023) suggests that in modern times, businesses have actively engaged in efforts to generate and disseminate word-of-mouth communication in order to promote their products and services. They often encourage existing customers, family members, friends, peers, influential opinion leaders, and celebrities to speak favourably about their offerings to boost sales effectively. This type of company-supported word-of-mouth communication aims to elicit positive reactions from customers (Anyadighibe et al., 2022; Etim et al., 2023; Inyang et al., 2022). Thus, it can be inferred from scholarly perspectives on word-of-mouth communication that it is a two-fold phenomenon that can occur naturally or be stimulated by organisations in subtle ways. Sánchez-Casado et al. (2019) further explain that word-of-mouth communication utilises people with whom customers have personal relationships or individuals they admire, respect, and look up to as communication channels. This reinforces and enhances the authenticity and credibility of the communication, thereby increasing its potential to elicit positive responses from the target audiences (Etuk et al., 2022).

Referral

A referral occurs when one of your clients recommends you to a prospect, often based on a positive experience they had working with you. This recommendation is rooted in a personal connection between you and the client. Since the prospect is receiving a trusted recommendation, it can be a strong motivator for them to give you a try. Referrals are often the result of excellent client service, relationship building, and exceeding client expectations. Referral is when an existing customer

recommends giving brands to their friends, family, colleagues, or peers to encourage patronage (Sánchez-Casado et al., 2019). It is any peer-to-peer communication about companies' products and services to influence peer members to patronise the companies. In a simple sense, referral is the process whereby an existing product user formally or informally advises their friends, family, colleagues and social associates to purchase and use a particular brand based on their experience and recommendations (Glory, Edim, Inyang & Eko, 2023). According to Bulte et al. (2018), customer referral occurs mostly from a satisfied customer who has enjoyed a remarkable experience with a company's brand. Naturally, they are more likely to tell others about the awesome products or services that they have tried with the intention of leading them to patronize the company. Conversely, when customers are dissatisfied with a firm's products or services, they tend to spread negative word-of-mouth communication to discourage their friends, family, colleagues and others from doing the same. This is why companies need to prioritize the production and delivery of high-quality products in the first place to accelerate the chances of obtaining positive recommendations from existing customers (Berman, 2019; Etim et al., 2023; Mpuon et al., 2023). Similarly, Roy et al. (2019) maintained that Whichever way it is executed, customer referral has an extremely powerful influence on consumers' psychology because the recommendation comes from well-known and trusted friends, family or colleagues. This is opposed to recommendations from the company's advertising sources, which are already known to customers to be paid for. Given the high credibility and trustworthiness of the peer-to-peer recommendation, it is more likely to generate sales and encourage customer patronage than paid advertising.

Social media

By definition, social media is a set of various web services that can be interrelated for social interaction using highly accessible and scalable communication techniques (Subramanyam and Greenfield, 2018). Those web services refer to user's capacity to create, publish and share contents that are accessible in various platforms – basically webs and mobiles. Mayfield (2018) explains that social media is online or electronic media which facilitates participation, openness, conversation, community and connectedness amongst online users. The core of social media as explained by Trusov et al. (2019) lies in fact that users can have individual profiles and personal images, users are able to communicate their thoughts, feelings, interests (music, hobbies, preferences) and link to affiliated profiles (friends or professional fan pages). Marcus and Shalom (2018) said social media have created a platform for both businesses and customers to communicate worldwide. Mangold and Faulds (2009) describe social media as "a set of online word of mouth forums or social networks". Social media is used to discuss and share information among people and business. Businesses and consumers can use the functions of social media as a criteria for market segmentation, where they want to reach professionals they concentrate on LinkedIn or artist they use Instagram to show or view pictures. This has enabled productive marketing and time management. Kwok & Yu (2013) stated that customers trust reviews from other customers more than those posted by businesses.

Organizational Performance

Organizational performance is the ability of an organization to reach its goals and optimize results. organizational performance can be defined as a company's ability to achieve goals in a state of constant change (AlHamad et al., 2022). Organizational performance involves analyzing a company's performance against its objectives and goals (Leitão et al., 2019). Organizational performance

comprises real results or outputs compared with intended outputs (Singh et al., 2021). Organizational performance is divided into three main outcomes shareholder value performance, financial performance, and market performance (Nordqvist, 2017). Organizational performance is characterized by its ability to achieve predefined goals efficiently and effectively (Vegter et al., 2020). This involves optimizing resource utilization to attain desired outcomes while adhering to the organization's mission and values (Pambreni et al., 2019). Innovative organizations, displaying strong performance, embrace novel ideas and technologies to enhance their processes, products, and services, gaining a competitive edge (Amini & Jahanbakhsh, 2023). Moreover, the capacity to adapt to evolving circumstances is crucial, allowing organizations to navigate changing markets, technologies, and customer preferences while maintaining their performance levels (Dagnino et al., 2021).

The Effect of Word of Mouth on Purchase Intention

According to Febiana (2014), it was pointed out that WOM variables affected consumers' purchase intention, where purchase intention may be caused by word-of-mouth measured by reference group indicators (family, close friends, and acquaintances). On the other side, consumers can discuss WOM with other consumers who have similar interests. This will change or reinforce consumers' attitudes towards the brand/product during conversations and help consumers decide whether to buy or decline the brand/product (Xie & Lee, 2015). Positive word of mouth can increase consumer confidence, help shape positive expectations about product quality, and reduce perceived uncertainty, all of which lead to greater purchase intentions (Awad & Ragowsky, 2024). Negative word of mouth will decrease consumers' interest in brands/products and scare consumers with possible losses Luo and Homburg (2024), which in turn reduces purchase intentions. Besides that, some scholars have noticed that negative WOM got a positive impact on purchase intention by increasing brand/product awareness [18] or providing various information when WOM spreads are high (Otugo, et al, 2015).

Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework underpinning this study is social exchange theory, propounded by Kelman (1958). This theory is considered relevant to this study because it explains the processes through which organizations uses word-of-mouth marketing to influence and shape consumers' purchase behaviour towards their products.

The Social Exchange (SEG) Theory was used to underpin the study. Specifically, the concept of social exchange has been applied to consumer interactions (Kumar, Paul, & Starevi, 2021). In order to better understand WOM and customer retention, SEG theory has emerged as the major influential ideas (Lin, Gursoy, & Zhang, 2020). Therefore, it is a suitable theoretical lens through which WOM can be examined in the context of customer retention. Because WOM communication involves customers' free activities, prior research implies that, it is a SEG (Prentice, 2019). According to the theory, interactions between customers are frequently based on a cost-benefit strategy that is implicit (Kumar, 2021). Also, a consumer may contribute knowledge and experience about goods and services out of a sense of future gain from the contributions made by other customers. Participation has previously been examined using the social exchange theory, particularly how WOM affects organization performance (Soliman & Kamel, 2021). However, the theory has not been utilized to its full potential because to prior research failing to acknowledge the multidimensional nature of trust, a crucial construct in SEG theory (Lin, Gursoy, & Zhang, 2020).

Empirical Review

Abiala and Jegede (2024) carried out a research to investigate the impact of word-of-mouth marketing on consumer purchase decision of Fumcy Kitchen, Ilaro Ogun State. The study adopted a survey research design and relied upon the use of a structured questionnaire to gather quantitative data from 269 respondents who are customers of Fumcy Kitchen. The study concludes that word-of-mouth marketing has a significant influence on consumer purchase decision.

Ehimen and Asiagwu (2023) looked at whether word-of-mouth marketing improves customer retention or not. In order to collect data from the target sample of Samsung Electronics Company consumers in Delta State, a survey questionnaire was used in this study's quantitative research approach to evaluate the hypotheses and meet the study's objectives. The study disclosed that, word of mouth marketing is a major driver of customer retention. As such, the paper submits that, for Samsung Company to strive in Nigeria, the company should strengthen their interactions and relationships with their customers through word-of-mouth marketing. Contributively, the paper advances the field's understanding of the importance of word-of-mouth marketing in boosting consumer satisfaction and maintaining long-term connections with them.

Glory, Edim, Inyang and Eko (2023), study Word-of-mouth communication and customer patronage behaviour towards smartphones. A cross-sectional survey research design was employed to gather primary data from 276 smartphone users, who responded to a 5-point Likert scale questionnaire. The collected data underwent analysis using descriptive statistics and inferential statistics, specifically multiple linear regression. The results indicated that customer referral, celebrity endorsement, and social media exerted significant positive influences on customer patronage behavior towards smartphones.

Eze, Nnabuko and Beredugo (2014) examined the influence of word-of-mouth communication on consumers' choice of selected products in Nigeria. To this end, the study evaluated also factors that induce word-of-mouth. In all, a total of three objectives were developed and in an attempt to test them, a survey research method was used. Sample was drawn from consumers of selected companies' products in Lagos, Rivers, and Anambra States; while the tools used for hypotheses testing included Pearson product moment correlation coefficient and the OLS. The results of the study shows that Consumers' interactions through word-of-mouth (WOM) had a major impact on consumer response to a product and that quality product induces word-of-mouth communications, and largely driven by Consumer-orientation.

Method

This study is survey-based research because it uses a questionnaire to obtain data from a representative sample of a large population to make inferences about the population in terms of their admittance to Delta State Maritime Polytechnic, Burutu. Hence, the specific survey research design adopted is a cross-sectional survey research design, which studies a representative sample of students admitted at a single point in time to provide a snapshot of the current state of association between word-of-mouth and student's patronage. The target population comprised 1,400 students admitted in Delta State Maritime Polytechnic, Burutu, Delta State, which resulted in a sample size of 311 students through the Taro Yamane sample size estimation procedure (Chaokromthong & Sintao, 2021). To select the respondents for the survey exercise, we adopted the convenience sampling technique. The researcher administered a structured questionnaire to respondents to obtain the data required. The research questionnaire had a 5-point Likert scale design with statements adapted from Emily and Saunders

(2020); Adjertey and Annang (2017); Abraham et al. (2018); and Anyadighibe et al. (2022). Statements 1-4 were designed to measure referral; statements 5-8 were designed to measure social media; and statements 9-16 were designed to measure patronage behaviour of students. Face and content validity methods were adopted to validate the questionnaire, while Cronbach's alpha coefficients confirmed the instrument's reliability before field administration. The instrument was considered reliable because all its measurement scales generated Cronbach's alpha coefficients ranging from 0.7 and above: Referral [$\alpha = 0.852$]; social media [$\alpha = 0.749$]; and patronage behaviour of students [$\alpha = 0.805$]. Subsequently, the hypotheses developed for this study were statistically tested and validated using multiple linear regression with the following regression model:

$$OP = a + \beta_1 REF + \beta_2 SOMED + e$$

Where:

a	= The Constant
β_1REF	= Coefficient of referral
β_2SOMED	= Coefficient of social media
e	= Error margin (5 per cent)

Analysis and Discussion

To obtain data for the study, a total of 311 questionnaire copies were administered to students. However, 276 copies (representing 82.9 per cent) were retrieved and considered usable for analysis, while the remaining 57 copies (representing 17.1 per cent) were technically unusable for the study. Following a multivariate analytical procedure, the null hypotheses developed for the study were tested as follows:

(i) Ho1: Referral has no significant effect on student's patronage behaviour towards Delta State Maritime Polytechnic, Burutu.

(ii) Ho2: Social media has no significant effect on student's patronage behaviour towards Delta State Maritime Polytechnic, Burutu.

Predictors: Referral and social media

Outcome: Student's patronage behaviour

Decision rule: The null hypothesis (Ho) is rejected when the P-value is below 0.05 ($p < .05$). Conversely, if the P-value is above 0.05 ($p > .05$), the null hypothesis is accepted

Table 1: Model summary of the effect of word-of-mouth communication on organization performance (student's patronage behaviour) towards Delta State Maritime Polytechnic.

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.614[a]	.426	.416	2.31909

a. Predictors: (Constant), Referral and social media

Source: Authors' calculations via SPSS (2026)

Table 2: ANOVA[a] of the effect of word-of-mouth on organization performance (customer patronage behaviour) towards Delta State Maritime Polytechnic

Model		Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	998.147	4	998.147	201.320	.000[b]
	Residual	1343.491	271	4.958		
	Total	2341.638	275			

a. Dependent Variable: organization performance (Student's patronage behavior)
b. Predictors: (Constant), Referral and social media
Source: Authors' calculations via SPSS (2026)

Table 3: Coefficients of the effect of word-of-mouth on organization performance (customer patronage behaviour) towards Delta State Maritime Polytechnic

Model		Unstandardised Coefficients		Unstandardised Coefficients		
		B	Std. Error	Beta	T	Sig.
1	(Constant)	16.042	.827		19.403	.000
	Referral	.344	.073	.332	4.720	.000
	Social media	.538	.086	.360	6.262	.000

a. Dependent Variable: organization performance (Student's patronage behavior)
Source: Authors' calculations via SPSS (2026)

Interpretation

The results displayed in Tables 1-3 depict the multiple regression analysis of the effect of word-of-mouth on organization performance (Student's patronage behaviour) towards Delta State Maritime Polytechnic, Burutu. Table 1, which is the model summary, reveals that the relationship between the independent variable (word-of-mouth) and the dependent variable (organization performance) is 61.4 per cent (as seen in the R column), which indicates a very strong degree of correlation. The coefficient of determination (R2(꾨)2) of 0.426 indicates that up to 42.6 percent of the variants in the dependent variable (organization performance) are explained or predicted by the independent variable (word-of-mouth). This implies that a unit change in word-of-mouth will affect organization performance (student's patronage behaviour) towards Delta State Maritime Polytechnic, Burutu by up to 42.6 per cent when other factors are held constant. The F-test (201.320, $P < 0.05$) statistic in Table 2 indicates that the overall prediction of the dependent variable by the independent variable is statistically significant; therefore, the regression model provides substantive evidence to conclude that word-of-mouth has a significant effect on organization performance (student's patronage behaviour) towards Delta State Maritime Polytechnic, Burutu. Table 3 is the coefficients table, which provides necessary information on the capability of each word-of-mouth dimension to predict the dependent variable organization performance (student's patronage behaviour).

From the table, it can be seen that the two word-of-mouth dimensions tested (Referral and social media) significantly predicted student's patronage behaviour towards s

Delta State Maritime Polytechnic because their p-values are less than the error margin of 0.05, with positive t-test values. This indicates that the relationship between these variables and student's

patronage behaviour is a direct and positive one. Additionally, the standardised beta coefficient column in Table 3 shows the individual contributions of each independent variable to the model. As can be seen in the column, social media had the highest contribution to the model, with a beta coefficient of 0.360 (36.0 per cent). This is followed by Referral, with a beta coefficient of 0.332 (33.2 per cent). The results of the multiple regression analysis show that the p-values (Referral = 0.000 and social media = 0.000) of all independent variables were less than the error margin of 0.05. Hence we reject all the null hypotheses, accept all alternative hypotheses and conclude that referral and social media significantly positively influenced students patronage behaviour towards Delta State Maritime Polytechnic, Burutu.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The study looked at how word-of-mouth influenced students' decisions to be admitted into Delta State Maritime Polytechnic, Burutu. The study specifically evaluated the degree to which a student's decision to be admitted is influenced by referrals and social media, plays a role in a student's decision to be admitted, and the challenges that Delta State Maritime Polytechnic students encounter in generating word-of-mouth and how they conquer them. The results showed that students admissions are significantly influenced by factors such as referral and social media. The study found that students' decisions to be admitted in Delta State Maritime Polytechnic are significantly influenced by word-of-mouth.

In light of the study's conclusions, the following recommendations are made:

i. Delta State Maritime Polytechnic should put an emphasis on creating unforgettable experiences in order to increase student's loyalty because satisfied students are more likely to refer the institution to others.

ii. Delta State Maritime Polytechnic should make an investment in excellent in-person contacts with students in order to make a lasting impact and foster an environment that inspires them to talk about their satisfying experiences.

iv. By continuously surpassing students expectations and converting happy students into ardent supporters, Delta State Maritime Polytechnic should strengthen brand preference.

Limitations and Future Research

This study was constrained to just two parameters of word-of-mouth (namely referral and social media). It is critical for future studies to incorporate more variables, particularly e-word of mouth, to explore the role of word-of-mouth communications in impacting consumer behaviour in the digital age. This study was overwhelmingly constrained to the educational sector in Nigeria and the focus was on one institution, Delta State Maritime Polytechnic, Burutu; hence its generalizations are limited to this market. For the sake of extended generalization, future research should be replicated across other industries, such as fast-moving consumer goods, banking, telecommunications, hospitality and transportation, to generate new insights for practical utilization.

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