

## **CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE AND WORD OF MOUTH COMMUNICATION (WOMC) IN INTER-STATE BRANDED TRANSPORT COMPANIES: MEDIATING ROLE OF BRAND SATISFACTION**

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### **ABSTRACT:**

The conceptualisation and delivery of memorable experience to tourists in the tourism industry has become a source of competitive advantage for tourism service providers. This current study examined the direct and indirect effect of customer experience on word of mouth communication in the transportation sector of the tourism industry in the garden city of Port Harcourt, Rivers State, Nigeria. The descriptive survey research gathered data from 150 inter-state passengers who commute with branded transport companies in Port Harcourt. A well structured questionnaire containing 12 items, with four demographic items was used to generate data from the respondents. The model developed for the study was validated with the help of SPSS after data editing, with reliability analysis of the instrument and inferential statistics. The result of the inferential statistical analysis revealed that word of mouth towards the branded transport companies is driven by customer experience. The mediating role of brand satisfaction also exists significantly between customer experience and word of mouth communication. The study concludes by positing that the delivery of memorable customer experience is capable of delighting passengers and thus promote positive

passengers' behavioural outcomes such as positive word of mouth. Transport service providers and their managers are expected to build capabilities in the area of experiential value conceptualisation and delivery based on pre-determined needs and expectations of their passengers who constitute the target market. Academic and professional implications are provided.

**Keywords:** Customer experience. Brand Satisfaction. Word of Mouth Communication.

### **INTRODUCTION:**

The tourism and hospitality industry is characterized by consumption of variety of experiences which is psychological in nature (Pine and Gilmore, 1998). For any service provider to achieve competitive advantage in the industry, the quality of service experience should be capable of enhancing tourist satisfaction and other behavioural intentions such as Word of Mouth Communication (WOMC). This is one of the ways to survive in a global tourism industry that is intensively competitive (Perdue, 2002). The demand on tourism service marketers is therefore to seek ways to understand the target market's needs and expectations so as to deliver experiential value. This is achieved through the development of tourism marketing strategies that will deliver customer value and allow the tourism service providers to capture value in return (Kotler &

Armstrong 2010). Rather, (2018) argued that creating excellent customer experiences remains the main source of differentiation strategy which promotes competitive advantage because it generates valuable customer relationships.

The foregoing is a confirmation of the paradigm shift from traditional marketing to experiential marketing (Pine & Gilmore 1999; Schmitt 1999; Brakus, Schmitt, & Zarantonello 2009) since experience has become the product in the competitive tourism industry. Consequently, operators of tourism service organisations like hotels, airlines, restaurants, car rental companies, etc., should develop capabilities for the delivery of excellent customer experiences. The essence is to achieve customer satisfaction and positive behavioural responses to the service brand. The result will be excellent organizational performance.

In extant literature, there exist ample empirical evidence to demonstrate the extensive search for the effect of customer/brand experience on customer/guest satisfaction and consumer behavioural intentions (Ebrahim, Ghoneim, Irani & Fan, 2013; Brakus, et al., 2009; Kassim, Igau, Harun, & Tahajuddin, 2014; Jang & Feng 2007; Chinomona, 2013; Alia, Hussainb, & Ragavan, 2014; Gabioch & Gweba, 2011). However, to the best of our knowledge, studies on customer experience in the transport sector seems scarce. This current study attempts to fill the gap in literature by investigating the effect of customer experience on word of mouth communication with brand satisfaction serving as the mediating variable in the context of branded inter-state transport services in Port Harcourt, River State, Nigeria.

## **CONCEPTUAL REVIEW:**

### **Customer Experience:**

Experience are sensations (Brakus, et al, 2009) which Pine and Gilmore, (1998, p. 12)

described as “a distinct economic offering, as distinct from services as services are from goods”. The concept of brand experience was defined by Brakus, et al, (2009, p.52) as “sensations, feelings, cognitions, and behavioural responses evoked by brand-related stimuli that are part of a brand’s design and identity, packaging, communication and environment”. Customers gain service experience when they encounter a service brand, thus confirming the argument by Gentile, Spiller, and Noci (2007) that, customer experience originates from a set of interactions between product and customer, or part of its organization, which essentially provokes a reaction, which is personal experience with customer’s involvement. This happens at different levels including emotional, rational, sensorial, and physical.

For this current study, sensory and emotional experiences are the dimensions of customer experience adopted.

### **Sensory Experience:**

Schmitt, (1999, p.61). posit that sensory experience “appeals to the senses with the objective of creating sensory experiences, through sight, touch, taste and smell”. It is a combination of the what the five human senses (sound, smell, taste, sight, touch) perceives that interact together to form the foundation for sensory experience (Hulten, Broweus & Dijk, 2009)

### **Emotional Experience:**

Emotional component of customer experience is what helps consumers to develop emotional bond with brands with the possibility of developing positive feelings towards the brand (Schmitt, 1999).

### **Brand Satisfaction:**

Tse and Wilton (1988, p. 204) defined the concept of customer satisfaction as

“consumer’s response to the evaluation of the perceived discrepancy between prior expectation and the actual performance of the product as perceived after its consumption”. On the other hand, Atarodian(2013, p.204) sees customer satisfaction as “a level of performance that meets customer expectations”. The concept is equally described as a judgment made by consumers based on a specific service encounter or product purchase/consumption (Cronin & Taylor, 1992). Customer satisfaction has been found in various market contexts to be an antecedent to customers’ post consumption behavioural intentions towards the brand. For example, in a study conducted by Atarodian(2013)in Iran, customer satisfaction had positive effect on consumers’ attitudes toward the brand, loyalty and re purchase intention.

**Word-of-Month Communication (WOMC):**

Shimp(2007) is of the view that Word of mouth communication as a person-to-person communication between a communicator who is independent from the brand and the receiver(s), while Sen and Lerman (2007, p. 77) defined WOM as “a face-to-face conversation between consumers about a product or service experience”. Gummesson (1999) is of the view that there is a consensus among scholars indicating that positive WOMC has greater influence on consumers’ behavioural intentions more than conventional communication tools. Grewal, in the context of new product development, Baker, Levy and Voss (2003) found that WOMC was considered more important than advertising. Bansal and Voyer (2000) is of the view that WOMC communication is commonly found among family members, friends, neighbours and acquaintances

**CONCEPTUAL MODEL AND HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT:**

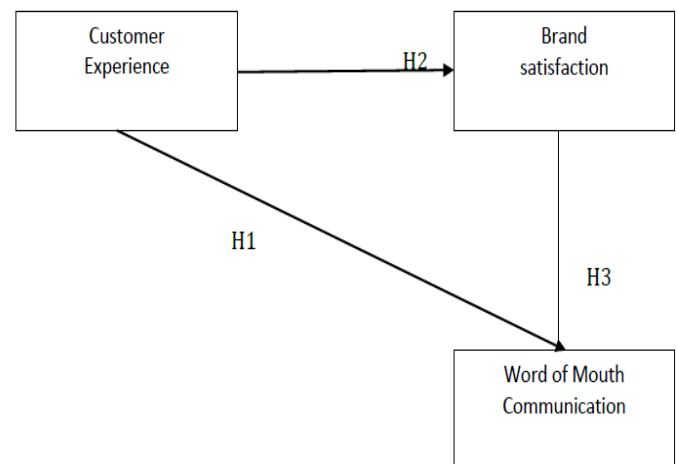


Figure 1: Customer Experience Word of Mouth Communication Model

The research model demonstrates that customer experience has both direct and indirect effect on word of mouth communication. The indirect effect of customer experience on word of mouth communication is mediated by brand satisfaction.

**Hypotheses Development:**

**Customer Experience and Brand Satisfaction/Word of Mouth Communication:**

Alia, Hussainb, & Ragavan, (2014) found that all four dimensions of customer experience influenced their memories and loyalty. In the Malaysian two tourist spots of Langkawi and Penang. Brakus, Schmitt, and Zarantonello, (2009) found that brand experience (sensory, affective, intellectual, and behavioral) affects consumer satisfaction and loyalty directly and indirectly through brand personality associations. In telecommunication market context in Egypt, El Nagger and Benndary (2017) in Egypt, found that brand experience had direct and positive relationship with brand loyalty.

Hosany and Witham,(2010) found that the four dimensions of cruisers' experiences (education, entertainment, esthetics and escapism) had direct and positive relationship with satisfaction, and intention to recommend (WOMC). Ali, Amin, and Cobanoglu, (2015) in the context of Chinese resort hotels, found that service experience/emotions, influenced customer satisfaction significantly. In Melbourne, Australia, Wahyuningsih, and Nurdin, (2010) found that the higher the level of satisfaction, the higher the consumer's intentions to repurchase and tell others positive things about the purchased product and company to other people. In Damascus, Syria, Al-Msallam, and Alhaddad, (2016) research findings showed that customer satisfaction, trust on hotel and affective commitment had a positive and significant correlation with customer loyalty.

Understanding what constitute experiential value by operators and managers of transport companies is very crucial towards enhancing passing satisfaction and subsequent positive behavioural intentions. Several studies ., (Hosany & Witham,2010; Brakus, et al, 2009)in several market contexts tends to confirm that, sensorial, emotional, intellectual, behavioural experiences and other dimensions of brand experience have positive effect on customer satisfaction and consumer behavioural intentions such as positive word of mouth communication and repurchase intentions.

Based on the foregoing, we therefore expect that;

**H1:** The higher the customer experience a customer has, the higher the word of mouth communication by passengers of inter-state branded transport companies in Port Harcourt.

**H2:** Customer experience significantly affects brand satisfaction in inter-state branded transport companies in Port Harcourt.

**H3:** Brand satisfaction significantly affects customers' word of mouth communication in inter-state branded transport companies in Port Harcourt.

### **Mediating role of Brand Satisfaction:**

Kassim, Igau,Harun, and Tahajuddin, (2014) found a significant relationship between perceived product quality and brand loyalty, while customer satisfaction mediated the relationship between perceived product quality, perceived value, and brand loyalty, while the relationship between perceived value and brand loyalty was not significant in the mobile phone market in Malaysia. In Semarang, Central Java, Indonesia, Ngatno (2017) foundthat brand communication and experience had positive effect on brand satisfaction and trust while brand satisfaction and trust showed partial mediation between brand experience and loyalty

Kassim, Igau, Harun,Tahajuddin, (2014) examinedthe mediating role of customer satisfaction in the relationship between perceived product quality, perceived value, and brand loyalty in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah among mobile phone users. The statistical results showed that customer satisfaction significantly mediated the relationship between perceived product quality,perceived value, and brand loyalty.

Brand satisfaction is of great interest in services marketing and that is why service organisations should ensure that their customers are offered memorable experiences at all times. This argument is critical to organisational performance because there are empirical evidence to show that customer satisfaction has links with purchase/consumption and post-purchase behaviours such as repeat purchase,

attitude change, loyalty and positive word-of-mouth (Fornell, Johnson, Anderson, Cha, & Bryant, 1996; Stevens, Knutson, B. & Patton 1995); Oliver, 1994; Oliver, 1997).

From the foregoing, we can hypothesize that;

**H4: Customer Satisfaction mediates the causal effect of customer experience on word of mouth communication in inter-state branded transport companies in Port Harcourt, Nigeria**

#### **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY:**

##### **Research design:**

The research design adopted for the study is the descriptive research design. The reason is because the empirical study involved the collection of data that deal with passengers' attitude, preference, behaviour and perception of the experiences associated with transportation services.

##### **Sample and data collection:**

The population of study were the passengers who patronised branded inter-state buses from their terminals in Port Harcourt. Due to the fact that the population was very large and unknown, the sample size of 150 was determined using Freund and Williams formula. A well-structured questionnaire was used to generate data from the respondents using judgemental sampling technique. Out of a total of 150 questionnaires distributed, 123 were retrieved, and they all proved very useful and were therefore subjected to statistical analysis.

##### **Demographic Profile of Respondents:**

The profile analysis of the respondents showed that 58 respondents (42.2%) were male while 65 respondents (52.8%) were female. For age brackets, 20 respondents (16.3%), were less than 20 years, 46 respondents (37.4%) were within 20–29 years, 27 respondents (21.9%) were within 30–39

years while 30 respondents (24.4%) were greater than 40 years. From the age bracket data, majority of the respondents were within the ages of 20 – 29 years.

Information on respondents' highest level of education, data revealed as follows; those with senior secondary school certificate (SSCE/GCE) were 25 (12.2%), Higher National Diploma and Bachelor degree (HND/B.SC) 53 (43.1%), MA/MSc/MBA (27) (21.9%) and Ph.D (18) (22.8%). Respondents with a first degree were of the majority.

The analysis of the number of years that the respondents patronised the inter-state branded transport companies were as follows; below 2 years 19(15.4%), 2-4years 30(24.3%), 5-8 years 41(33.3%), 9 years and above 33(27%). This information implies that majority of the passengers had patronised the inter-state branded transport companies in Port Harcourt between 5 and 8 years.

##### **Measurement Instrument and Questionnaire design:**

The questionnaire was the major instrument for data collection. The measurement scale used was a five-point Likert-type scale anchored by: Strongly Disagree [SD](1), Disagree [D](2), Agree [A](3), Agree fairly strongly(4) and Strongly Agree [SA](5).

All the items were adapted from extant literature. The two dimensions of customer experience (sensory and emotional experiences) were measured using items adapted from (Brakus, et al 2009). The three items used for brand satisfaction were adapted from Ryu, Lee and Kim, 2012 and Lim (2010), while items for word of mouth communication were adapted from Bansal and Voyer (2000) and Sweeny and Swait (2008).

**RESEARCH RESULTS:**

**Reliability Analysis:**

**Table 1 Reliability Statistics**

Cronbach's Alpha	Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardized Items	N of Items
.991	.991	12

The Cronbach Alpha used in determining the reliability of the 12-item research instrument produced a value of .991. The value of the Cronbach Alpha is .991 as shown in Table 1. This value is above the threshold value of .7 as suggested by Nunnally and Bernstein (1994). This shows that the measuring instrument is internally consistent and therefore helpful and applicable in measuring opinions of customers of exclusive bars in the context of the determinant of the experiential value of customers and how it affects their intention to revisit the bars.

**Discriminant Validity:**

**Table 2 Correlation Matrix**

	Customer Experience	Customer Satisfaction	Word of Mouth Communication
Customer Experience	1.000	.923	.934
Brand Satisfaction	.923	1.000	.955
Word of Mouth Communication	.934	.955	1.000

Table 2 above shows the correlation matrix which is used to ascertain the discriminant validity. The result confirms the discriminant validity as the diagonal elements are greater than all the off-diagonal elements in their columns and rows in line with the suggestion of Fornell and Larcker (1981)

**Sampling Adequacy:**

**Table 3 KMO and Bartlett's Test**

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy.		.777
Approx. Chi-Square		550.142
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Df	3
	Sig.	.000

Table 3 is a representation of the Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) which was performed on 12 exploratory items of customer experience, brand satisfaction and word of mouth communication as specified in the conceptual model in Figure 1. The result shows that the Bartlett's test of sphericity is significant at  $p < .000$  and KMO measure of sampling adequacy is .777 which is far greater than 0.5 which Kaiser (as cited in Wong & Musa 2010, p. 3417) suggested as a minimum level.

**Data Analyses:**

To ascertain the effect of customer experience on word of mouth communication and other hypothesised relationships, simple regression analysis was conducted.

**Hypothesis 1 Customer Experience and Word of Mouth Communication:**

Table 4 Simple Regression analysis showing the effect of customer experience on word of mouth communication

**Table 4. The simple regression analysis for the influence of customer experience on word of mouth communication**

Dependent variable	Independent Variable	Beta(β)	t-value	p-value
Word of Mouth Communication	Customer Experience	.934	28.797	0.00**

**Notes:**  $P \leq 0.05$ ;  $R = .934$ ;  $R^2 = .873$ ; Adjusted  $R^2 = .872$ ;  $F = 829.281$ ;  $P = 0.000$

From the Table, the following results are shown: standardized beta ( $\beta$ ) of customer experience ( $\beta = 0.934$ ), adjusted R square = 0.872,  $F = 829.281$  and  $p = .000 < 0.05$ . This specifies that customer experience explains 87.2% variation in word of mouth communication in branded transport companies in Port Harcourt, Rivers State Nigeria. The outcome of analysis show that

customer experience had positive significant effect on word of mouth communication to the branded transport companies ( $\beta = 0.934$ ,  $p=0.000 < 0.05$ ). Hypothesis one was therefore supported.

**Table 5: Multiple Regression Analysis for dimensions of Customer experience H1a and H1b**

**Table 5 Coefficients<sup>a</sup>**

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
1 (Constant)	.258	.144		1.793	.075
Sensory Experience	.412	.084	.388	4.914	.000
Emotional Experience	.531	.075	.563	7.128	.000

a. Dependent Variable: Word of Mouth Communication

Table 5 provides the multiple regression analysis for the contribution of the two dimensions of customer experience used in the study and hypothesised as H1a and H1b respectively. The table shows that unstandardized beta ( $\beta$ ) of sensory experience and emotional experience are: ( $\beta = 0.412$ ), and ( $\beta = 0.531$ ) respectively. This implies that emotional experience made the greatest contribution to the research model.

The result of the regression analysis shows that both sensory experience ( $\beta = 0.412$ ,  $p=0.000 < 0.05$ ) and emotional experience ( $\beta = 0.531$ ,  $p=0.000 < 0.05$ ) provided by the branded inter-state transport companies in influencing their customers' behavioural intentions (word of mouth communication) made significant contribution to explaining the dependent variable. The two sub hypotheses were therefore supported.

Therefore, the model can be written as:

$$\text{Word of Mouth Communication} = 0.412(\text{SE}) + 0.531(\text{EE}) + .258.$$

The model suggest that by associating the two dimensions of customer

experience (sensory experience and emotional experience) of a branded inter-state transport company, the empirical model can increase the level of customers' positive word of mouth communication when other things remain constant. Accordingly, changes in sensory and emotional experience of each branded interstate transport companies can have the biggest influence on level of customers positive word of mouth communication.

### Hypothesis 2 Customer Experience and Brand Satisfaction

Table 6 Simple Regression analysis showing the effect of brand satisfaction on word of mouth communication

**Table 6. The simple regression analysis for the influence of customer experience on brand satisfaction**

Dependent variable	Independent Variable	Beta( $\beta$ )	t-value	p-value
Brand Satisfaction	Customer Experience	.923	26.294	0.00**

**Notes:**  $P \leq 0.05$ ;  $R = 0.923$ ;  $R^2 = 0.851$ ;  
Adjusted  $R^2 = 0.850$ ;  $F = 691.394$ ;  $P = 0.000$

From Table 6, the following results are shown: standardized beta ( $\beta$ ) of customer experience ( $\beta = 0.923$ ), adjusted R square = 0.851,  $F = 691.394$  and  $p = 0.000 < 0.05$ . This specifies that customer experience explains 85.0% variation in brand satisfaction in inter-state branded transport companies in Port Harcourt, Rivers State Nigeria. The outcome of analysis show that customer experience had positive significant effect on brand satisfaction to the branded transport companies ( $\beta = 0.923$ ,  $p=0.000 < 0.05$ ). Hypothesis two was therefore supported.

**Hypothesis 3 Brand Satisfaction and Word of Mouth Communication:**

**Table 7. The simple regression analysis for the influence of brand satisfaction on word of mouth communication.**

Dependent variable	Independent Variable	Beta(β)	t-value	p-value
Brand Satisfaction	Customer Experience	.955	35.427	0.00**

**Notes:**  $P \leq 0.05$ ;  $R = .955$ ;  $R^2 = .912$ ; Adjusted  $R^2 = .911$ ;  $F = 1255.049$ ;  $P = 0.000$

From Table 7, the following results are shown: standardized beta (β) of brand satisfaction (β = 0.955), adjusted R square = 0.911,  $F = 1255.049$  and  $p = .000 < 0.05$ . This specifies that brand satisfaction explains 91.1% variation in word of mouth communication in branded transport companies in Port Harcourt, Rivers State Nigeria. The outcome of analysis show that brand satisfaction had positive significant effect on word of mouth communication to the interstate branded transport companies (β = 0.955,  $p = 0.000 < 0.05$ ). Hypothesis three was therefore supported.

**Testing of hypotheses 1, 2 and 3 Decision Rule**

If  $PV < 0.05$  = Hypothesis is supported  
 If  $PV > 0.05$  = Hypothesis is not supported

**H1:** The outcome of analysis show that customer experience had significant effect on passengers' word of mouth communication to the transport companies in Port Harcourt (β = 0.934,  $p = 0.000 < 0.05$ ).

**H1a:** The outcome of analysis show that sensory experience had significant effect on passengers' word of mouth communication to

the transport companies in Port Harcourt (β = 0.412,  $p = 0.000 < 0.05$ ).

**H1b:** The outcome of analysis show that emotional experience had significant effect on passengers' word of mouth communication to the transport companies in Port Harcourt (β = 0.531,  $p = 0.000 < 0.05$ ).

**H2:** The outcome of analysis show that customer experience had significant effect on brand satisfaction in the branded transport companies in Port Harcourt (β = 0.923,  $p = 0.000 < 0.05$ ).

**H3:** The outcome of analysis show that brand satisfaction had significant effect on passengers' word of mouth communication to the branded transport companies in Port Harcourt (β = 0.955,  $p = 0.000 < 0.05$ ).

**Hypothesis four: Mediation Test**

**Table 8 Coefficients<sup>a</sup>**

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
1 (Constant)	.228	.133		1.709	.090
1 Customer Experience	.922	.032	.934	28.797	.000

a. Dependent Variable: Word of Mouth Communication

**Table 9 Coefficients<sup>a</sup>**

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
1 (Constant)	-.317	.112		-2.820	.006
1 Customer Experience	.352	.061	.357	5.742	.000
1 Customer Satisfaction	.707	.070	.626	10.075	.000

a. Dependent Variable: Word of Mouth Communication

The analytics calculators version 2.0 was used to compute the Sobel test for mediation with the following values a, (.23) s<sub>a</sub>, (.13) b, (.70)



and  $s_b(.07)$  extracted from Tables 8 and 9. The result were as follows;

Sobel Test Statistics= 1.74217429

One Tailed Probability=0.04073839

Two Tailed Probability=0.08147795

The test statistic for the Sobel test is 1.742 with an associated  $p$ -value= 0.04 (one tailed probability). The fact that the  $p$ -value is < 0.05 is an indication that the association between the independent variables (customer experience) and the dependent variable (word of mouth communication) is reduced significantly by the inclusion of the mediating variable (brand satisfaction) in the model. This finding therefore shows that there is a clear evidence of mediation. We therefore conclude that hypothesis 4 is supported.

From the foregoing, all the hypotheses (H1, H2, H3 and H4) were all supported.

#### DISCUSSION OF RESULTS:

**Hypothesis 1** showed a significant effect of brand experience on customers' word of mouth communication towards branded transport companies in Port Harcourt ( $\beta = 0.934$ ,  $p=0.000 < 0.05$ ). Therefore, H1 is supported. This finding is consistent with the findings of Ebrahim, et al (2016), Jang and Feng (2007) Gani, et al (2019), where customer experience had positive significant effect on customer satisfaction in various market contexts. Further statistical analysis showed that for **H1a** sensory experience had significant effect ( $\beta = 0.412$ ,  $p=0.000 < 0.05$ ) on repurchase intentions of upscale restaurant customers. This finding is inconsistent with Nasermodeli, et al (2013). For **H1b**, emotional experience had significant effect ( $\beta = 0.531$ ,  $p=0.000 < 0.05$ ) on customers' repurchase intentions. This finding is consistent with Nasermodeli, et al (2013).

**Hypothesis 2** posited a significant effect of customer experience on brand satisfaction at

the inter-state branded transport companies in Port Harcourt. With  $\beta = 0.923$ ,  $p=0.000 < 0.05$ , the effect is significant. This result is consistent with the prediction of H2 and is therefore supported. Thus, a higher level of brand experience provided by inter-state branded transport companies is associated with a high propensity by the passengers to be satisfied with the brand. This finding is consistent with the finding of Hosany and Witham (2010), Brakus, et al (2009) and Ali, et al (2015).

**Hypothesis 3** posited a significant effect of brand satisfaction on customers' positive word of mouth communication to the inter-state branded transport companies in Port Harcourt. With  $\beta = 0.955$ ,  $p=0.000 < 0.05$ , the effect is significant. This result is consistent with the prediction of H3 and is therefore supported. Thus, a higher level of brand satisfaction arising from experiential value provided by inter-state branded transport companies in Port Harcourt is associated with a high propensity by passengers to engage in positive word of mouth. This finding is consistent with the finding of Wahyuningsih, and Nurdin (2010) and Al-Msallam and Alhaddad (2016).

**Hypothesis 4:** The result of the Sobel test shows that the test statistic is 6.108 while the  $p$ -value is  $0.000 > .050$  which means that the association between customer experience and word of mouth is reduced significantly because the observed  $p$ -value falls below the established alpha value of .05. The findings of this study show that brand satisfaction mediates the relationship between customer experience and passengers' word of mouth in inter-state branded transport companies indirectly through the mechanism and framework of brand satisfaction. This finding is consistent with Kassim, et al (2014).

## CONCLUSION:

The empirical study investigated the effect of customer experience on passengers' word of mouth in inter-state branded transport companies in the tourism market segment in the Garden City of Port Harcourt, Rivers State, Nigeria with brand satisfaction mediating the outcome of the intervention. Data collected from current passengers of the selected inter-state branded transport companies was used to test four hypothesised relationships developed for the study. The empirical results supported all the research hypotheses significantly.

A very important finding of the study is the fact that further statistical analysis of the effect of the two dimensions of brand experience on word of mouth communication, emotional experience ( $\beta = 0.617$ ,  $p=0.000 < 0.05$ ) made the highest significant contribution to the model. The reason may not be far-fetched, as it could be ascribed to the fact that an average branded transport companies is designed and equipped to offer pleasurable travel experiences to passengers.

It is therefore safe to conclude by stating that the outcome of the research indicates that emotional experience is an important determinant of customers' behavioural intentions such as word of mouth communication, with brand satisfaction mediating the relationship. It is very important for operators of inter-state branded transport companies to be careful in the time of experiential value they deliver because of its consequences. The empirical study provides purposeful and fruitful implications for both academics and practitioners.

## Implications of the Study:

On the academic side, this current study makes a very important contribution to the brand management and experiential marketing literature by systematically exploring the effect of customer experience on word of mouth

communication with brand satisfaction mediating the relationship in Nigeria.

Overall, the current study findings therefore provide tentative support to the proposition that customer experience and brand satisfaction should be recognized as significant antecedents for gaining and sustaining word of mouth communication in inter-state branded transport companies.

On the practitioners' side, the significant influence of customer experience and mediating role of brand satisfaction in the transport sector in Nigeria is highlighted. This study therefore argue that operators of transport companies in Nigeria can benefit from the implications of these findings. For instance, given the robust relationship between customer experience and word of mouth communication (0.934), customer experience and brand satisfaction (0.768) and also between brand satisfaction and word of mouth communication (0.955), marketers ought to pay very good attention to both customer experience and brand satisfaction in order to build customers' positive word of mouth communication. For example, by providing wireless interconnectivity, coupled with infotainment solutions, passengers could access travel information like street maps, smart parking etc. appropriate technology could also provide up to date and timely information on route stops, schedules, etc. All these could enhance passengers' emotions and excite human senses, thus satisfying the passengers through the resulting experiential value. Eventually, the passengers will be delighted to the extent of spreading positive word of mouth communication which is a credible source of marketing communications.

## Limitations and Future Research:

Collection of data from Nigerians only is a limitation to this study because it cannot

guarantee the generalisability of the study findings. The study could be improved upon if other Nationals who are visiting Nigeria for touristic experiences are included in future studies.

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