

## **SOCIAL MEDIA ENGAGEMENT AND CUSTOMERS' LOYALTY TO TELECOM SERVICE FIRMS IN CROSS RIVER STATE: A CASE STUDY OF MTN**

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### **Abstract**

This study investigated the influence of MTN Nigeria's social media engagement—specifically on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram—on customer loyalty. The objective was to determine the extent engagement on these platforms significantly affects loyalty behaviours of MTN subscribers. A survey research design was employed, targeting MTN digital marketing managers, social media officers, and subscribers in Calabar, Cross River State. A total of 1,111 respondents were sampled, consisting of 1,100 customers and 11 MTN staff, selected through purposive sampling technique. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire, validated through expert review, with reliability confirmed at Cronbach Alpha coefficient of 0.73. Descriptive statistics and simple linear regression were used for analysis. Findings revealed that Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram engagement each had a statistically significant influence on customer loyalty, though the explanatory power was modest. Facebook emerged as the most impactful platform, followed by Twitter and Instagram, but together they accounted for less than 10% of the variance in customer loyalty. The study concludes that while MTN's social media engagement contributes positively to loyalty, it should not be viewed as a standalone driver. It recommends enhancing platform-specific strategies, complemented by broader service quality and customer experience initiatives to strengthen overall customer loyalty.

**Keywords:** Telecom Companies, Customer loyalty, Social media engagement, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter.

### **1.1 Introduction**

In recent years, social media has become an indispensable tool for customer engagement and brand building across industries, including the telecommunications sector. In Nigeria, the telecom industry is highly competitive, with major players such as MTN Nigeria, Airtel, Globacom, and 9mobile striving to retain customers in an increasingly digital and dynamic environment. Among these, MTN Nigeria remains the market leader with over 80 million

subscribers as of 2024, commanding a dominant share of the market (Nigerian Communications Commission [NCC], 2024).

With the proliferation of mobile internet usage and smartphones, social media has become a strategic platform for businesses to engage customers. Globally, brands leverage platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter (X), and WhatsApp not only to advertise products but to build trust and long-term relationships (Statista, 2024). In Nigeria, the telecom industry is one of the largest sectors benefiting from social media-driven engagement due to its wide customer base. MTN Nigeria, the market leader in telecom services, has over 85 million subscribers and maintains an active presence on social media. However, despite this, customer loyalty remains unstable, with frequent porting among networks (NCC, 2023). The central concern is whether social media engagement efforts are yielding the expected outcomes in customer retention and satisfaction.

As customers become more digitally inclined, social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and WhatsApp have transformed into essential channels for customer relationship management, marketing, and customer service. The concept of social media engagement refers to the degree of interaction, involvement, and participation that a customer exhibits with a brand's content across digital platforms. This includes liking, commenting, sharing, messaging, and responding to brand communications (Ismail, 2023).

Studies have shown that higher levels of social media engagement can positively influence customer loyalty, particularly in service-oriented industries like telecommunications. Customer loyalty is often reflected in continued patronage, reduced switching behavior, and positive word-of-mouth promotion. According to Chinedu and Salihu (2023), social media engagement improves brand awareness and emotional connection, which fosters long-term customer loyalty in Nigerian telecom firms.

In the Nigerian context, MTN has actively employed digital tools and interactive platforms to improve user experience and satisfaction. These include platforms such as MTN's mobile app, Twitter support handles, and WhatsApp chatbot services. Through such platforms, MTN provides real-time customer service, delivers promotional content, and encourages customer feedback. Empirical research by Okoye and Eze (2023) confirms that these strategies contribute significantly to perceived service quality and customer retention in urban markets across southern Nigeria.

However, while there is abundant research on social media engagement and customer loyalty at the national level, studies focusing on sub-national regions like Cross River State are sparse. This is significant because regional differences in literacy levels, internet penetration, urbanization, and digital behavior may influence how customers interact with telecom firms on social media (Effiom & Essien, 2022). Cross River State, with its mix of urban centers like Calabar and rural communities, presents a unique demographic and digital landscape that warrants investigation. Furthermore, despite MTN's visible digital marketing efforts, the relationship between social media engagement and customer loyalty within this region remains underexplored. Understanding this relationship is crucial for telecom firms seeking to tailor engagement strategies that reflect the needs, preferences, and expectations of local customers.

Previous studies in this area indicate that high engagement rates on Facebook correlate with increased brand trust, customer satisfaction, and loyalty intentions (Ogunleye & Akinyemi, 2023). In the Nigerian telecom industry, Facebook is widely used by MTN to provide customer support through comment replies and messenger chats, announce promotions and tariff changes, launch branded campaigns (e.g., "MTN Pulse"), host interactive sessions such as Facebook Live events. According to Okoroafor and James (2023), MTN's Facebook campaigns targeting young customers significantly increased brand recall and behavioral loyalty among university students in southeastern Nigeria (Adebayo &

Ogunlade, 2022). Ganiyu et al. (2023) conducted a mixed-method study in Lagos examining how Facebook interaction affects customer retention among MTN and Airtel users, and found that interactive posts, humorous contents, and timely responses were strong predictors of emotional loyalty. In the study, users who received prompt replies to complaints on Facebook were more likely to stay loyal, even when service issues persisted. Other studies that support these outcomes include Ayoola and Bello (2024), Eze and Abiodun (2023), Olatunji and Ibekwe (2022), Nwachukwu and Kalu (2023), Obasi and Ekanem (2023). Nonetheless, loyalty is multifactorial, and MTN must integrate Facebook activities within a broader strategy that includes network quality, pricing fairness, and excellent customer service.

### **1.2 Statement of the problem**

In an increasingly digital world, social media has become a vital communication and engagement channel between businesses and their customers. Telecom service providers, especially MTN Nigeria, the market leader; have invested heavily in building social media presence across platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram. These platforms offer opportunities for real-time engagement, customer service, feedback solicitation, promotional campaigns, and brand community building. Despite these investments, there remains a growing concern about the effectiveness of such engagement in fostering actual customer loyalty, especially at the grassroots level in regions like Cross River State.

Customer loyalty in the telecom sector has become more difficult to sustain due to intense competition, network portability, data pricing wars, and customer dissatisfaction with service quality. While MTN maintains an impressive digital footprint and frequently rolls out engaging campaigns (e.g., "MTN Pulse", "#JustForYou", or "Data4ME"), anecdotal and observable evidence shows that many subscribers still exhibit signs of brand-switching behavior, vocal dissatisfaction, and weak emotional attachment to the brand. Moreover, users often complain that MTN's responses on social media are slow, impersonal, or inconsistent, which may create perceptions of negligence or lack of care.

In Cross River State, particularly within Calabar Metropolis, a region with a digitally active youthful population, it is unclear whether MTN's social media strategies are yielding tangible results in terms of increased customer trust, retention, and advocacy. Prior studies in Nigeria have largely taken a generalized national approach, with limited attention to localized and context-specific dynamics that affect consumer loyalty at the state level.

Additionally, there is a dearth of empirical studies that specifically examine the quality, responsiveness, interactivity, and perceived value of MTN's social media engagement from the consumer's perspective. Most existing research focuses on generic social media metrics (likes, shares, follows), while neglecting how these engagements translate into deeper relational outcomes such as repeat patronage, emotional attachment, and positive word-of-mouth.

This study, therefore, addresses a critical gap by examining how MTN's social media engagement practices influence customer loyalty within Cross River State. It seeks to unravel whether the telecom giant's online presence translates into real-life loyalty outcomes or remains merely superficial interaction. Without empirical data to guide strategic improvements, MTN and similar telecom firms risk investing in digital tools that do not meaningfully impact customer retention; a scenario with significant financial and reputational implications in an already competitive market

### **1.3 Objectives of the study**

The main objective of this study is to examine the relationship between social media engagement and customer loyalty to telecom services firms in Cross River State, using MTN as a case study.

The specific objectives are to:

1. To determine the level of relationship between MTN's Facebook engagement and customer loyalty
2. To assess the level of relationship between MTN's Twitter engagement and customer loyalty
3. To assess the level of relationship between MTN's Instagram engagement and customer loyalty

#### **1.4 Research questions**

1. To what extent is the relationship between MTN's Facebook engagement and customer loyalty?
2. To what extent is the relationship between MTN's Twitter engagement and customer loyalty?
3. To what extent is the relationship between MTN's Instagram engagement and customer loyalty?

#### **1.5 Hypotheses**

1. There is no significant relationship between MTN's Facebook engagement and customer loyalty
2. There is no significant relationship between MTN's Twitter engagement and customer loyalty
3. There is no significant relationship between MTN's Instagram engagement and customer loyalty

#### **1.6 Literature Review**

Social media engagement refers to user interactions such as likes, shares, comments, and messages, serving as a key indicator of brand–audience relationship strength and a predictor of loyalty (Gavilan et al., 2021). Engagement has shifted from passive viewing to active participation, where consumers co-create content and influence brand narratives (Harrigan et al., 2021). In telecommunications, meaningful engagement enhances customer trust, satisfaction, and retention, especially when content is personalized and responsive (Alalwan, 2022; Zollo et al., 2023).

Customer loyalty involves consistent patronage and emotional attachment to a brand, expressed through both behavioural and attitudinal dimensions (Oliver, 2020). Loyalty is shaped by trust, service quality, responsiveness, and digital interactions, with social media becoming an essential loyalty-building touchpoint for tech-savvy users (Odoom et al., 2022). Platform-specific engagement plays a strategic role. Facebook allows brands to disseminate updates and respond to inquiries, with strong engagement improving brand perception and loyalty (Ibrahim & Aljamal, 2023; Kim & Yang, 2022). Twitter's real-time structure supports customer service and crisis management, and active engagement enhances satisfaction and loyalty (Nwachukwu et al., 2022). Hashtags and influencers further drive visibility (Al-Gasawneh & Almaiah, 2021). Instagram's visual format enables storytelling and influencer-driven campaigns, significantly strengthening brand affinity and repeat patronage (Kwarteng & Boateng, 2023).

Overall, effective, platform-tailored engagement across Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram plays a crucial role in fostering loyalty in the telecom industry, helping firms like MTN build durable customer relationships.



**Basic Trust Theory (Erikson, 1950)** emphasizes reliability and honesty as foundations of loyalty. MTN's transparent communication and quick complaint resolution on social media build trust, a critical factor in telecom customer retention.

Collectively, these theories show that consistent, reciprocal, trust-orientated digital interactions enhance loyalty.

### **MTN's Twitter Engagement and Customer Loyalty**

Twitter's real-time microblogging functions make it central to MTN's customer service and brand visibility. Studies show that MTN uses Twitter for promotions, humor, complaint resolution, and campaigns such as #MTNPulse. Research (Ayankoya & Moyo, 2024; Ogunyemi & Opara, 2022) indicates that interactive responses increase emotional loyalty and perceived reliability, though behavioral loyalty remains weak without strong service delivery. Evidence from network-outage case studies (Gbolahan & Yusuf, 2022) reveals that prompt Twitter messaging reduces negative sentiment and prevents customer churn.

Other studies (Ishola & Edeh, 2023; Okeke & Falade, 2023; Umeh & Agada, 2022) show that Twitter enhances satisfaction, emotional connection, and trust but has limited long-term effects unless supported by strong service quality. Twitter is particularly influential among youth, who respond to culturally relevant content. Empirical findings consistently show modest explanatory power ( $R^2$  around 0.08), meaning most loyalty determinants lie outside social media engagement, such as pricing and network reliability.

Overall, Twitter improves short-term satisfaction, emotional loyalty, and trust restoration. However, sustained loyalty requires combining digital engagement with superior service performance and fair pricing.

## **1.7 Research Methodology**

The study used a survey design to collect data from a large population and generalize findings on social media engagement and customer loyalty.

### **Study Area**

Calabar, Cross River State, one of the major hubs of MTN activities and subscribers in Nigeria.

### **Population**

The population of the study comprised of:

- MTN digital marketing managers and social media officers, and
- MTN subscribers who interact with official social media pages. The population is unknown.

### **Sample Size and Technique**

A sample of 1,111 respondents (1,100 customers and 11 MTN staff) was selected through purposive sampling to target individuals knowledgeable about MTN's social media interactions.

### **Instrument**

The instrument was a structured questionnaire administered physically and online, with separate sections for MTN staff and subscribers.

### **Validity and Reliability**

The validation of the instrument was through face and content validity, through expert reviews; while the reliability was confirmed through a pilot test which gave a Cronbach Alpha of 0.73.

## Data Analysis

The data analysis was through Simple linear regression.

## Ethical Considerations

Informed consent, anonymity, confidentiality, and voluntary participation were observed in the study.

### 1.8.1 Results and Discussion

This section presents respondents' demographics and descriptive statistics of study variables (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram engagement, and customer loyalty). Data were analyzed using SPSS v21.

**Demographics:** Of the 1,111 respondents, 58% were female, 39% male, and 3% undisclosed. Most were young adults: 18–25 years (40%) and 26–35 years (26%), indicating a tech-savvy sample. Occupations included civil servants (39%), students (29%), business owners (21%), and private employees (9%). Education was high: 60% had higher education and 31% secondary education. Over half (52%) had patronized MTN for more than 16 years, showing long-term brand association. Platform preference: Facebook (49%), Twitter (26%), and Instagram (24%). This structure ensures diversity and reliability, with Facebook as the dominant engagement platform.

**Table 1: Descriptive Statistics**

S/N	Independent Variables	Mean	Standard Deviation	Result
1	Facebook engagement:	mean = 13.10		highest among platforms.
2	Twitter:	mean= 12.56.		Moderate outcome
3	Instagram:	mean = 12.34	(SD = 3.78)	lowest with highest variability
4	Customer loyalty: (SD = 3.18).	mean = 12.68	(SD = 3.18)	with lowest variability

**Implication:** Facebook was the most effective for interaction, while Instagram shows inconsistent engagement.

### 1.8.2 Hypotheses Testing

#### Hypothesis One – Facebook & Customers' Loyalty

The regression analysis result shows  $F = 20.977$ ,  $p = 0.000$ , confirming that Facebook was significant.  $R = 0.308$  and  $R^2 = 0.094$  which indicate that Facebook explains 9.4% of loyalty variance. The relationship is positive but modest, suggesting that other factors like pricing and service quality matter more. MTN should enhance interactive content but integrate Facebook within other broader loyalty strategies.

#### Hypothesis Two – Twitter & Customers' Loyalty

Results ( $F = 22.47$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ) show significance with  $R = 0.284$  and  $R^2 = 0.081$ , meaning Twitter explains 8.1% of loyalty variance. The weak-to-moderate positive link highlights Twitter's value for real-time updates and customer service, though not a standalone loyalty driver.

### **Hypothesis Three – Instagram & Customers' Loyalty**

Analysis results reveal ( $F = 18.079$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ) confirms significance.  $R = 0.311$  and  $R^2 = 0.083$  indicate Instagram explains 8.3% of loyalty variance. While effective in emotional branding and storytelling, its modest impact requires integration with other strategies.

### **1.9 Discussion of Findings**

The findings reveal that social media engagement across Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram significantly influences customer loyalty toward MTN, though the strength of these relationships is modest. The regression results (Facebook:  $R^2 = 0.094$ ; Twitter:  $R^2 = 0.081$ ; Instagram:  $R^2 = 0.083$ ) suggest that while these platforms contribute to loyalty formation, they explain only a small proportion of its variance, indicating the presence of other influential factors such as pricing, service reliability, and network quality. This aligns with the submission of Adebayo and Iweha (2022), who found that although social media enhances customer connection and satisfaction, service performance remains the dominant loyalty predictor in Nigeria's telecom sector.

Facebook's impact, though moderate, underscores its role in fostering interactive brand relationships and customer trust through engaging posts and timely responses (Harrigan et al., 2021). Twitter's influence appears mainly through its immediacy in resolving service complaints and delivering real-time information, confirming earlier observations by Kapoor et al. (2022) that conversational engagement on Twitter improves customer satisfaction but not necessarily long-term loyalty. Instagram's emotional and visual storytelling appeal supports, and this agrees with Alalwan et al. (2020), who emphasized that aesthetic content builds affective loyalty though it must be combined with functional value propositions.

Overall, this study supports the assertion by Dwivedi et al. (2021) that social media engagement acts as a relational catalyst rather than a primary loyalty determinant. MTN should therefore embed social media engagement within a holistic customer retention framework integrating superior service quality, fair pricing, and experiential marketing.

### **1.10 Summary of Findings**

The study assessed MTN's social media engagement (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram) and its impact on customer loyalty. Findings revealed all three platforms significantly influence loyalty, though modestly ( $R^2 = 0.081$ – $0.094$ ). Thus, engagement is relevant but insufficient alone.

### **1.11 Conclusion**

MTN's social media efforts contribute positively to loyalty but explain less than 10% of variance, confirming loyalty is multifactorial. Over 90% of loyalty outcomes are shaped by factors like network reliability, pricing, and customer service.

### **1.12 Recommendations**

1. Telecom companies should adopt a multichannel strategy combining social media with email, SMS, loyalty apps, and service centers.
2. Telecom companies should enhance their platform-specific engagement through interactive posts on Facebook, responsiveness on Twitter, and storytelling on Instagram.
3. Telecom companies should prioritize service quality through network performance, data speed, and prompt problem resolutions —to complement digital engagement.

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