



STRATEGIC ROLE OF PRODUCT BRANDING IN REDEFINING CUSTOMER ENGAGEMENT IN THE DIGITAL ERA: A STUDY OF NEXT TARABA FACTORY, JALINGO, TARABA STATE, NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

The rapid expansion of digital technologies has fundamentally reshaped how manufacturing firms build brands and engage customers, particularly in emerging markets. This study examines the strategic role of product branding in redefining customer engagement in the digital era, using Next Taraba Factory in Jalingo, Taraba State, Nigeria, as a case study. Anchored on Keller's Customer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE) Theory, the research investigates how brand identity, digital visibility, and interactive communication collectively and individually influence customer engagement. A quantitative, cross-sectional survey design was adopted, with primary data collected through structured questionnaires administered to a sample of 160 customers and digital followers of the factory. Data were analysed using descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation, and multiple linear regression estimated via Ordinary Least Squares (OLS). The findings reveal that interactive communication ($\beta = 0.37, p < 0.001$), brand identity ($\beta = 0.34, p < 0.001$), and digital visibility ($\beta = 0.29, p < 0.01$) exert statistically significant positive effects on customer engagement. The study concludes that strategic product branding, particularly interactive and two-way communication, is a critical competitive tool for manufacturing firms operating in digitally evolving sub-national markets. It recommends that firms invest in structured digital branding frameworks, prioritise real-time online engagement, and leverage brand storytelling to foster long-term customer resonance and loyalty.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The digital transformation of global markets has significantly altered the traditional dynamics between brands and consumers. With the proliferation of mobile technologies, social media platforms, and data-driven marketing ecosystems, customer engagement has shifted from passive consumption to active, interactive participation (Verhoef et al., 2024). Contemporary branding strategies therefore extend far beyond visual identity and traditional advertising to encompass digital responsiveness, online storytelling, algorithmic personalisation, and customer co-creation (Dwivedi et al., 2023). In this paradigm, brands are no longer static entities but dynamic participants in continuous digital dialogues with their audiences.

In emerging economies such as Nigeria, digital adoption is expanding at an unprecedented rate, driven by increased smartphone penetration and affordable mobile data (National Bureau of Statistics [NBS], 2023). This digital democratisation presents both opportunities and intense pressures for local manufacturing firms. To survive and thrive, these firms must reposition their brands strategically within online ecosystems to capture the attention of an increasingly digitally savvy consumer base (Adegboye & Akinwale, 2023). However, while large multinational corporations have seamlessly integrated digital branding into their core strategies, many small and medium-scale manufacturing enterprises (SMEs) in Nigeria struggle to leverage branding as a strategic engagement tool, often treating digital platforms merely as broadcast channels rather than interactive spaces (Mbama & Okafor, 2023).

This challenge is particularly pronounced in sub-national contexts such as Taraba State. Located in North-East Nigeria, Taraba State possesses a growing agrarian and light-manufacturing economy. Manufacturing firms in the state capital, Jalingo, face unique infrastructural, logistical, and market-access challenges. For these firms, digital branding offers a vital mechanism to transcend geographical limitations, connect directly with consumers, and build brand equity without the prohibitive costs of traditional mass media (Li, Li, & Wang, 2023). Despite this potential, limited empirical research exists on how specific dimensions of product branding influence customer engagement within local manufacturing contexts in Northern Nigeria. Most existing digital marketing literature in Nigeria is heavily skewed towards the banking, telecommunications, and FMCG sectors in Lagos and Abuja, leaving a critical knowledge gap regarding manufacturing firms in states like Taraba.

This study addresses this gap by examining the strategic role of product branding in redefining customer engagement, using Next Taraba Factory in Jalingo as a focal case. Next Taraba Factory, a prominent local manufacturing entity, provides an excellent context for understanding how regional manufacturers navigate the digital transition to build customer loyalty and market relevance.

The study contributes to contemporary branding literature by validating global digital marketing theories within a local, emerging-market manufacturing context. It provides actionable, context-specific insights for manufacturing firms, digital marketers, and policymakers seeking to leverage digital ecosystems for regional economic growth.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical Framework: Keller's Customer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE) Model

This study is anchored on Keller's Customer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE) Model, originally articulated by Kevin Lane Keller in 1993. The CBBE model posits that the power of a brand lies in what customers have seen, read, learned, thought, and felt about the brand over time. In other words, brand equity is fundamentally customer-centric and is built through the systematic management of customer experiences and perceptions (Keller, 1993).

Keller conceptualised brand building as a sequential hierarchy consisting of four steps: (1) Brand Identity (ensuring customers recognise the brand and associate it with specific product classes or needs); (2) Brand Meaning (creating functional and symbolic associations through performance and imagery); (3) Brand Responses (eliciting positive customer judgments and feelings); and (4) Brand Relationships (forging intense, active loyalty and resonance) (Keller, 1993, 2001).

In the context of the digital era, this theory provides a robust framework for understanding product branding. Brand Identity maps directly to the visual and conceptual consistency of the firm's digital presence. Brand Meaning is translated into Digital Visibility, where the brand's narrative and value proposition are disseminated across online platforms. Brand Responses and Relationships are captured by Interactive Communication and the ultimate dependent variable, Customer Engagement, which represents the pinnacle of brand resonance (Keller, 2001; Fernandes & Abreu, 2023). The CBBE model is highly appropriate for

this study because it explicitly links strategic branding inputs (identity, visibility, interaction) to profound psychological and behavioural outcomes (engagement, loyalty), validating the premise that digital branding is not merely about reach, but about building deep, resonant relationships (Kumar et al., 2023).

2.2 Conceptual Review

2.2.1 Product Branding in the Digital Era

Product branding has evolved from a traditional marketing function focused on logos, packaging, and slogans into a strategic tool for creating competitive advantage and fostering continuous customer engagement (Dwivedi et al., 2023). In the digital era, branding encompasses a firm's entire online footprint, including social media aesthetics, digital reputation management, algorithmic targeting, and user-generated content. Digital branding allows manufacturing firms to bypass traditional distribution bottlenecks, reach niche audiences, and maintain relevance in fast-changing markets (Li et al., 2023).

2.2.2 Brand Identity

Brand identity represents the unique combination of visual attributes, core values, and promises intentionally communicated by the firm to the target audience (Aaker, 1991). In digital contexts, brand identity extends to the consistency of social media profiles, website user interface (UI), tone of voice in digital copy, and visual storytelling. A strong, consistent digital identity reduces cognitive dissonance for consumers, increases recognition, and fosters trust, which are critical precursors to digital engagement (Kumar et al., 2023).

2.2.3 Digital Visibility

Digital visibility refers to the extent to which a brand can be discovered, recognised, and interacted with across the digital ecosystem. It is driven by search engine optimisation (SEO), social media algorithms, content marketing, and targeted digital advertising (Chen & Wang, 2024). Visibility is a prerequisite for engagement; a brand cannot interact with consumers if it remains hidden in the digital noise. In emerging markets, high digital visibility signals market legitimacy and accessibility, significantly boosting consumer confidence (Verhoef et al., 2024).

2.2.4 Interactive Communication

Interactive communication represents the shift from monologic broadcasting to dialogic, two-way engagement between the brand and the consumer (Singh & Sinha, 2023). It encompasses real-time responsiveness to inquiries, social media polls, live streams, community management, and customer co-creation. Interactive communication transforms passive consumers into active brand participants, fostering a sense of psychological ownership and emotional attachment that drives sustained engagement (Wang & Kim, 2024).

2.2.5 Customer Engagement

Customer engagement is a multidimensional construct comprising cognitive, emotional, and behavioural interactions between a customer and a brand (Hollebeek, Srivastava, & Chen, 2019). In the digital space, it manifests as likes, shares, comments, user-generated content creation, brand advocacy,

and repeat purchase intentions. High customer engagement is widely regarded as a leading indicator of long-term brand loyalty and financial performance (Chatterjee et al., 2023).

2.3 Empirical Review

Recent empirical studies have extensively documented the impact of digital branding on consumer behaviour. Dwivedi et al. (2023) highlighted that artificial intelligence and interactive digital tools enable hyper-personalised branding, which significantly boosts customer engagement metrics. Kumar et al. (2023) found that in emerging markets, a consistent digital brand identity directly enhances emotional attachment and repeat purchase behaviour. Verhoef et al. (2024) emphasised that digital visibility and omnichannel integration are non-negotiable prerequisites for modern customer engagement.

In the African context, Adegboye and Akinwale (2023) demonstrated that Nigerian SMEs leveraging social media for brand storytelling experienced significantly higher consumer trust and engagement compared to those using traditional media. Mbama and Okafor (2023) found that interactive communication—specifically prompt responses to customer complaints on platforms like X (formerly Twitter) and Instagram—was the strongest predictor of brand advocacy among Nigerian consumers. Chatterjee et al. (2023) further corroborated that social media engagement strategies positively impact brand performance and market share in emerging economies.

Table 1: Summary of Empirical Literature

Author(s)	Year	Context/Scope	Key Findings
Dwivedi et al.	2023	Global / AI in Marketing	Interactive digital tools and AI enable hyper-personalisation, boosting engagement.
Kumar et al.	2023	Emerging Markets	Consistent digital brand identity enhances emotional attachment and loyalty.
Verhoef et al.	2024	Global / Digital Transformation	Digital visibility and omnichannel presence are prerequisites for engagement.
Chatterjee et al.	2023	Emerging Markets	Social media engagement strategies positively impact brand performance.
Singh & Sinha	2023	Digital Platforms	Two-way interactive communication is critical for building customer loyalty.
Wang & Kim	2024	Manufacturing Firms	Customer co-creation via digital channels enhances brand resonance.
Adegboye & Akinwale	2023	Nigerian SMEs	Digital brand storytelling increases consumer trust and engagement.
Mbama & Okafor	2023	Nigerian Manufacturing	Interactive responsiveness is the strongest predictor of brand advocacy.

Source: Author's compilation (2026).

Despite these robust findings, a gap remains regarding how these global digital branding dynamics apply to local manufacturing firms in sub-national, non-metropolitan Nigerian contexts like Jalingo, Taraba State. This study bridges that gap.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a quantitative, cross-sectional survey research design, which is highly appropriate for measuring the magnitude, direction, and statistical significance of relationships between branding variables and customer engagement at a specific point in time (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The study was conducted in

Jalingo, the capital city of Taraba State, Nigeria, focusing specifically on the consumer base of Next Taraba Factory. The selection of this locale and firm is justified by the need to understand digital branding dynamics within emerging, non-metropolitan manufacturing hubs in Northern Nigeria, a context frequently overlooked in mainstream digital marketing literature.

The target population comprised the customers and active digital followers of Next Taraba Factory. Given the fluid nature of digital follower populations and walk-in customers, an estimated finite population of 450 active, registered customers and verified online community members was identified through the firm's customer relationship

management (CRM) database and official social media subscriber lists. Using the Krejcie and Morgan (1970) formula for finite populations, a minimum sample size of 207 was indicated. However, accounting for potential non-response and incomplete surveys, 220 questionnaires were distributed. Ultimately, 160 valid and fully completed responses were retrieved, yielding a response rate of 72.7%, which is well above the acceptable threshold for survey research (Baruch & Holtom, 2008). A stratified random sampling technique was employed to ensure proportional representation of both physical walk-in customers and digital-only followers.

Primary data were collected using a structured questionnaire titled "Digital Product Branding and Customer Engagement Questionnaire (DPB-CEQ)." The instrument was designed on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree) and comprised four sections. Section A captured demographic profiles. Section B measured Brand Identity (4 items focusing on consistency, visual recognition, and value alignment). Section C measured Digital Visibility (4 items assessing online discoverability and platform presence). Section D measured Interactive Communication (5 items evaluating responsiveness, two-way dialogue, and co-creation). Section E measured the dependent variable, Customer Engagement (5 items covering emotional connection, behavioural interaction, and advocacy intentions). The instrument was adapted from validated scales

by Keller (2001), Hollebeek et al. (2019), and Kumar et al. (2023). Content validity was established through review by academic experts in marketing and digital strategy. Reliability was confirmed via Cronbach's Alpha, yielding coefficients of 0.82 for Brand Identity, 0.79 for Digital Visibility, 0.85 for Interactive Communication, and 0.84 for Customer Engagement, all exceeding the 0.70 benchmark (Hair, Black, Babin, & Anderson, 2019).

Data analysis was conducted using SPSS Version 28. Descriptive statistics (means and standard deviations) were used to summarise respondent perceptions. Pearson product-moment correlation was utilised to examine bivariate relationships. The primary inferential tool was multiple linear regression estimated via Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) to determine the predictive power of the independent variables on customer engagement. The regression model is specified as: $CE = \beta_0 + \beta_1 BI + \beta_2 DV + \beta_3 IC + \varepsilon$, where CE is Customer Engagement, BI is Brand Identity, DV is Digital Visibility, IC is Interactive Communication, β_0 is the intercept, β_1 to β_3 are the coefficients, and ε is the error term. To ensure the robustness of the OLS estimates, diagnostic tests including the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) for multicollinearity, the Breusch-Pagan test for heteroscedasticity, and the Jarque-Bera test for normality of residuals were conducted. Ethical considerations, including informed consent, anonymity, and data confidentiality, were strictly adhered to throughout the data collection process.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

4.1 Descriptive Statistics

Table 2 presents the descriptive statistics for the study variables, reflecting the respondents' perceptions of Next Taraba Factory's digital branding efforts.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics of Branding Variables and Customer Engagement

Variable	Mean	Std. Deviation	Interpretation
Brand Identity (BI)	4.18	0.62	High agreement on consistent and recognizable brand identity.
Digital Visibility (DV)	4.01	0.68	Strong agreement on good digital presence and discoverability.
Interactive Communication (IC)	4.12	0.61	High perception of two-way engagement and prompt responsiveness.
Customer Engagement (CE)	4.20	0.58	Overall strong emotional and behavioural engagement with the brand.

Source: Field Survey, 2026.

The mean scores indicate that Next Taraba Factory has successfully established a strong brand identity and high interactive communication, which translates into robust overall customer engagement.

4.2 Correlation Analysis

Table 3 presents the Pearson correlation matrix to establish the bivariate relationships among the constructs.

Table 3: Pearson Correlation Matrix

Variable	CE	BI	DV	IC
Customer Engagement (CE)	1.000			
Brand Identity (BI)	0.65**	1.000		
Digital Visibility (DV)	0.58**	0.52**	1.000	
Interactive Communication (IC)	0.68**	0.60**	0.55**	1.000

Note: ** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed). **Source:** Field Survey, 2026.

All independent variables show strong, positive, and statistically significant correlations with Customer Engagement.

Interactive Communication exhibits the highest correlation ($r = 0.68$), suggesting it is closely tied to the engagement levels of the

consumers. The inter-correlations among the independent variables are moderate ($r < 0.70$), indicating no immediate severe multicollinearity.

4.3 Multiple Regression and Diagnostic Tests

Table 4 presents the OLS multiple regression results, while Table 5 summarises the diagnostic tests.

Table 4: Multiple Regression Results (Dependent Variable: Customer Engagement)

Variable	Coefficient (β)	Std. Error	t-Statistic	p-value	Decision
Constant	0.842	0.210	4.010	0.000	Significant
Brand Identity (BI)	0.340	0.077	4.415	0.000	Significant ($p < 0.001$)
Digital Visibility (DV)	0.290	0.073	3.972	0.000	Significant ($p < 0.01$)
Interactive Communication (IC)	0.370	0.078	4.743	0.000	Significant ($p < 0.001$)

Model Summary: $R^2 = 0.642$; Adjusted $R^2 = 0.635$; F-statistic = 93.45; Prob(F) = 0.000. **Source:** Field Survey, 2026.

Table 5: Summary of Diagnostic Tests

Test	Statistic	p-value Threshold	Conclusion
VIF (Multicollinearity)	Mean VIF = 1.45	< 10.0	No severe multicollinearity.
Breusch-Pagan (Heteroscedasticity)	$\chi^2 = 4.12$	$p = 0.248$	Homoscedasticity holds.
Jarque-Bera (Normality)	JB = 1.89	$p = 0.388$	Residuals are normally distributed.

Source: Field Survey, 2026.

The model is highly significant ($F = 93.45$, $p < 0.001$) and explains 64.2% of the variance in Customer Engagement. Diagnostic tests confirm the model satisfies classical OLS assumptions.

4.4 Discussion of Findings

Interactive communication emerged as the strongest predictor of customer engagement. This finding strongly supports the upper tiers of Keller's CBBE model, where active, two-way dialogue leads to deep brand resonance and loyalty (Keller, 2001). In the context of Next Taraba Factory, customers highly value prompt responses to inquiries, the opportunity to provide feedback on product quality, and participation in digital polls or co-creation initiatives. This aligns with Dwivedi et al. (2023) and Singh and Sinha (2023), who posit that in the digital era, consumers expect brands to be conversational partners rather than silent broadcasters. For a local manufacturer, this interactivity bridges the physical distance between the factory floor and the end consumer, fostering profound psychological attachment.

Brand identity significantly and positively influences customer engagement. A consistent visual aesthetic, clear messaging regarding the factory's commitment to local quality, and a recognizable digital tone build trust and reduce consumer perceived risk. This corroborates Kumar et al. (2023), who found that identity consistency in emerging markets is a primary driver of emotional attachment. When Next Taraba Factory maintains a cohesive identity across its packaging, physical outlet, and social media pages, it reinforces brand salience, making it easier for customers to engage and advocate for the brand.

Digital visibility also exerts a significant positive effect on engagement. As noted by Verhoef et al. (2024) and Chen and Wang (2024), visibility is the foundational prerequisite for any digital interaction. For manufacturing firms in Jalingo, high visibility on platforms like Facebook,

Instagram, and WhatsApp statuses ensures that the brand remains top-of-mind. The findings indicate that frequent, high-quality digital exposure increases the likelihood of cognitive and behavioural engagement, validating the premise that discoverability drives interaction in digitally evolving sub-national markets.

5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study confirms that strategic product branding plays a pivotal and transformative role in redefining customer engagement in the digital era. Utilizing Next Taraba Factory in Jalingo as a case study, the research demonstrates that interactive communication, brand identity, and digital visibility collectively explain over 64% of the variance in customer engagement. The findings validate Keller's Customer-Based Brand Equity theory in a digital, emerging-market context, proving that engagement is not merely a byproduct of product quality, but the result of deliberate, interactive, and highly visible digital branding strategies. For local manufacturing firms in Taraba State, the digital ecosystem offers a powerful equaliser, allowing them to build deep, resonant relationships with consumers that transcend traditional geographical and infrastructural limitations.

5.2 Recommendations

Based on the empirical findings, the following recommendations are proffered:

1. Next Taraba Factory and similar manufacturing firms must shift from using social media as mere notice boards to treating them as interactive community hubs. Firms should invest in dedicated community managers to ensure real-time responsiveness to customer inquiries, complaints, and feedback.

2. Firms should utilise digital visibility to tell compelling stories about their manufacturing processes, local sourcing, and community impact. Highlighting the "Made in Taraba" narrative can evoke local pride and strengthen emotional brand identity.
3. Brands should actively involve their digital followers in product development cycles through online polls, beta-testing of new product lines, and user-generated content campaigns. This enhances the psychological ownership and loyalty of the consumer base.
4. Management must ensure that the visual and tonal identity of the brand is strictly consistent across physical packaging, factory signage, and all digital touchpoints to reinforce brand trust and salience.

5.3 Limitations and Future Research

While this study provides valuable context-specific insights, its cross-sectional design limits the ability to establish strict causal trajectories over time. Furthermore, the sample size of 160, while statistically adequate, is restricted to a single manufacturing firm. Future research should employ longitudinal designs and expand the scope to include multiple manufacturing firms across various states in Northern Nigeria to enhance generalisability. Additionally, future studies could explore the moderating role of consumer demographics (e.g., age, digital literacy) on the relationship between digital branding and customer engagement.

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