
AN EMPIRICAL STUDY ON PERCEPTIONS OF RURAL CONSUMERS OF WEST BENGAL ON MARKETING STRATEGIES ADOPTED BY VARIOUS MOBILE SERVICE PROVIDERS

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Abstract:

Customers are important and play a very vital role in process of formulating marketing strategies. In telecom sector, building blocks of success are customer loyalty and customer preference. Customer calculates value for money in terms of satisfaction they receive against the amount they pay for buying product or service. Market research plays an important role in identifying needs and expectations of customers and help strategy makers in designing product or service. The market is more sensitive and competitive than before. Markets are highly dynamic for Telecom operators. The challenging task for telecom companies is not only to increase its subscriber base but also to retain its existing customers by making appropriate strategies for them. The area chosen for the study is West Bengal, which is having several prominent rural areas of India, which comprises five divisions & from their five districts have been selected and at last out of these five districts five subdivisions has been selected namely Suri, Islampur, Mekhliganj, Tehatta and Egra. The areas have been selected due to the rural prominence. 212 respondents have been selected on this purpose & their opinion has been recorded with the help of a close ended questionnaire. The researcher has used 5 point likert scale to assess the responses properly from the selected respondents. Factor analysis & multiple regression analysis have been used as statistical tools to find out the most important factors. Findings of the study iterate that service qualities, promotion efforts, price discounts, distribution services and internal service quality are having significant relationship with consumer perceptions and among this service quality is the most influencing factor.

Keywords: Ruralites, Marketing Strategies, Mobile Network Operators, Perception, TRAI, NTP

Introduction:

Telecommunications is one of the few sectors in India that have witnessed the most fundamental structural and institutional reforms since 1991. Emerging as one of the fastest growing telecom markets in the world, Indian telecom still continues to register a significant growth. One cannot deny the fact that after the attainment of independence and to be more specific during 1980s and 1990s, the telecommunication services, have made rapid strides both in quality and quantity. However the users at large are found dissatisfied with the quality of services made available to them. The process of technological sophistication has gained the momentum but the users are yet to get the quality services. The level of efficiency is found disappointing and is instrumental in decelerating the rate of productivity. This makes it essential that we go through the problem with a new vision. It is against

this background that we make a strong advocacy in favor of the application of aggressive marketing principles in the Department of Telecommunications.

Deregulation, globalization, the emergence of the New Economy and introduction of new technologies such as mobile phones and broadband have forced the telecommunications companies to reconsider their strategy, their technological base and their product portfolio. In the context, companies have tried to develop and gain access to desired capabilities and resources and expanded across national boundaries to sustain their competitive advantages. Companies that lack some of the necessary new competencies used mergers, acquisitions, and partnership with other companies to acquire the essential technological knowledge and to penetrate new markets.

The Customer's value among competing brands of cellular services had suggested that the desired value had comprised of a preference for specific and measurable attributes of performances and hence were consequently linked to the goals of user requirements. The present scenario did not allow for consolidation but with the expansion of the customer data base it would promote the scaling of their operations. The call charges in the Telecommunication Services had been showing a downward trend in the last decade because of the advances made in Technology and the increased data base of the mobile service users. The launching of the per -second billing system had further intensified the competition among the players in the market.

The customer relationship is the most important factor in today's competitive environment. The dynamic change in the business environment of the cellular operators compelling them to improve their services along with their decreasing prices of their call rates had compelled the companies to shift their revenue models and their business processes to cope up with the changing needs and the expectations of the customers. The customers do not like any congestion in the network and they want to access their internet on their mobile handset in the minimum possible time. Another complex dimension of the competitive trend was that the Indian Telecommunications Industry was the ease of the imitation of the products and the services in the industry. This trend had fostered a scenario of a continuous effort for retaining and also for improving the customers share. A number of objectives had been set up by the customers in selecting the different operators' plans, on the basis of their past experiences with respect to the making of an evaluation in respect of their desired values. The Quality of the services based on the past experience had played a critical role in evaluating the services of the service provider.

Review of Literature:

Extensive literature survey is an integral part of every research work. Review of literature is necessary for the exact understanding of the topic under study. As the present topic is related to mobile phone services, an attempt is made here to review a few important studies conducted by various management researchers and professionals on these services.

Assaari and Karia (2000) in their paper have viewed that customer satisfaction and customer service have been critical factors of the cellular industry. Cellular service providers need to ensure about the technology that provides customer service best in the industry. It is stated that investment in people

and in technology helps in providing best customer service for today and for the future. One common ground that most carriers and customers agree on is that good customer service can have a key impact on how a customer views firm's services and company.

Chadha and Kapoor (2009) tested the effect of switching cost, service quality and customer satisfaction on customer loyalty in cellular services. The study was based on the responses taken from 220 subscribers of GSM services residing in two cities of Punjab; namely Ludhiana and Chandigarh. The results of the study found a positive relationship among the switching cost and customer perceived service quality, customer satisfaction and customer loyalty. Customer satisfaction has turned out to be the most significant predictor of the customer loyalty. The implications of the study for the mobile service providers were to focus on customer-oriented services and intensively concentrate efforts on improving network quality, pricing and value added services, in order to gain customer loyalty. Further, the switching cost contribute to increased loyalty and customer retention so cellular service provider should provide some reward programmes to increase the benefits of subscription. The service providers should also provide variety of recharge top-ups to help customers to reduce call charges and SMS rates.

Mohammad and Noorjahan (2009) have investigated the effects of customers' perceived service quality, trust, and customer satisfaction on customer loyalty. In order to test the conceptual framework, structural equation modeling (SEM) has been used. The primary data was collected from 304 customers of a major private telecommunication company operating in Bangladesh and the response rate was 90%. The average age of the respondents was 29 years. 59% respondents were male and 41 % were female. The results of the study indicate that trust and customer satisfaction are significantly and positively related to customer loyalty. Customer satisfaction has found to be an important mediator between perceived service quality and customer loyalty. A clear understanding of the postulated relationships among the studied variables highly useful for the mobile service providers to figure out appropriate course of action to win customers' trust by providing better services in order to create a loyal customer base.

Haque et al. (2010) undertook a study to examine and understand the consumers' behavioural perception choice in selecting mobile telecommunication service providers. As a general notion, consumers' perception is widely varied in accordance with the service quality, price, availability of product, and promotion, etc. A structured questionnaire was developed. Questionnaires were systematically distributed utilizing a non-probability convenience sampling from walk-in customers at market places, educational institutions, pedestrians' walk-ways (footpaths), government and private institutions. Primary data was collected randomly from the consumers as a convenience sample from Dhaka, Chittagong, Rajshai in Babgladesh. From the total of 350 responses, only 250 were considered complete and valid for data analysis. Thus, sample considered to be extremely good in view of time, cost, certainty and geographical constraints. Factor analysis was used in the study to identify the salient attributes that have impact on consumers' perception to evaluate the mobile telecommunication services providers. In addition, SEM (Structural Equation Modeling) has been carried out to investigate the relationship among the variables which influence the consumers' choice in selecting the telecommunication services providers. The outcome of this research shows a

comprehensively integrated framework to understand the vibrant relationships among several dimensions of service quality, price, product quality and availability, and promotion to have handful ideas on the consumers' perception. Among all the significant variables, from the result, price turned out to be the most important one

followed by service quality, product quality, and promotion. The findings of this study provide needed feedback and contribute to the improvement of telecom players' strategy and their marketing programme.

Dash and Kumar (2011) attempted to analyze various factors affecting the choice of mobile service providers and mobile subscriptions based on a field survey conducted in Bishalkhinda Panchayat in Odisha. The data was collected from the subscribers of mobile telecom services in Bishalkhinda village of Odisha and the sample for the same was 85 respondents. It is being evident from the results of the study that good network coverage has given the highest priority (average score of 4.34) while the dealers' recommendation was given the lowest priority (average score of 1.95). The brand image was ranked fifth in terms of average score and it was due to the way brand image was perceived by the rural customers. The study showed that service providers should look into the aspects of 'wide network coverage', 'easy recharge facility' and 'customer care facility' as main indicators to develop their marketing plan for rural customers.

Alshurideh et al. (2012) illustrated that the study primarily wants to identify the relationship between customer satisfaction & retention in Jordan based mobile companies. There are few other aims of studies like identifying the main factors which are causing customer satisfaction, customer switching & customer retention. 364 samples has been collected from various sources & the sampling method has been used for the study is named as convenience sampling. Chi-square test has been used to find out the result. The result reveals that customer satisfaction is having a direct effect on customer retention. The result also disclosing the fact that if the customers will get satisfied with services provided by the companies then customers will go for repeat purchase & they will retain themselves as a permanent purchaser of services.

Akarte et al. (2012) in their research article examined the comparison between rural & urban buyer & the motivation factors to buy a mobile phone. The research has been conducted in Amaravati District with a sample size of 400 out of 200 will be from rural area & rest is from urban. Price, quality, style, brand & functionality has been taken as a motivating factor & independent T test has been used to find out the result. The study reveals that rural customers are not so much motivated like urban customers in terms of functionality & brand.

Nasser et al. (2012) explained in their article that their primary objective is to find out that what are the factors affecting the customer satisfaction level in Yemen. The other objectives of the study are to find out the co-relation between customer satisfaction and customer expectation, corporate image, perceived quality & perceived value. 118 samples have been chosen from public universities of Yemen from questionnaire with the help of stratified random sampling. Correlation & Multiple regression analysis has been used with the help of SPSS to find out the result. The analysis reveals that all the four factors are having a positive relationship with customer satisfaction. But the study also reveals

that there is no statistical significance with the customer satisfaction, which means there is no significant relationship amongst these two factors.

Bhatt et al. (2012) clarified that in India presently the telecom sector is one of the most booming sector compare to any other in the market. The future of this sector is very bright as so many private players are entering to the market. The study reveals that every company has to keep their promises & provide good services to satisfy the customer unless they might lose them in no time. The study also reveals the attitude of the customers who are using a particular service providers services & the problems facing by them.

Fathima et al. (2013) expressed that huge population & rapid growth in economy is the primary reason for foreign companies to work in India. India is having a good prospect in future & the foreign marketers have understood it quite clearly. Due to its vastness & huge customer base telecom companies are trying to catch hold of the urban as well as rural customers. This paper mainly describes about foreign direct investments in Indian market, status of telecom market, and players in the market.

Golden et al. (2013) illustrated that for mobile service providers customer care is the very important are in case of retaining the customers. Everyday numbers of call are coming to the customer care & requesting for various services, technical problems, balance updates etc, so customer care needs to take care of every call. If the customers are satisfied then automatically they will retain themselves with the same service provider. The research has conducted in Tuticorin city & the result reveals that if the customers are not happy with the customer care services of the company then they will switch from one brand to another in no time. So, from the marketers' point of view they need to retain the old customers anyhow.

Hossain et al. (2013) illustrated that telecom companies are trying to improve the service quality to retain the customers & trying to make loyal customer. The study has been conducted in Bangladesh to find out the influence on customer satisfaction. Simple Linear Regression analysis has been used with descriptive statistics to find out the result. Results reveal that out of six factors, communication, price, VAS etc having a positive association with customer loyalty.

Jha (2013) illuminated in his article that the aim of the study is to show the comparison between rural & urban consumers behavior towards mobile services provided by various companies in Bihar. The paper mainly emphasizes on rural & urban consumer's behavior like their feedback on different services of mobile phone, the factors mainly influencing them at the time of purchasing a particular product, the buying pattern etc. 320 sample has been selected to conduct the study & Analytical Hierarchy Process (AHP) has been used to prioritize the process.

Kansal (2013) described that the main aim of study is to how service recovery affecting the customer satisfaction & is there any correlation lies between them or not. 200 respondents have been selected to conduct the study with help of discriminant analysis to find out the result. The study has been conducted in the 3 telecom majors namely Vodafone, BSNL & Airtel to find out how service recovery

is affecting the customer satisfaction in true terms. Results reveal that the customers of Vodafone are mostly happy with the service recovery process whereas BSNL & Airtel does not have that level of reputation in the market.

Ratnesh (2013) described that due to the emergence of mobile uses in the market the service providers are giving competition to each and every players in the market. According to the TRAI report Airtel, Vodafone & Idea has already captured the 70 % of the market. Telecom marketers are using some innovative ideas & strategies to attract the customers with their various services. The positive word of mouth is one of the important criteria to gain the customers & the customers will be satisfied enough if the basic services like coverage, quality, tariff will be good enough.

From the review of literature the researcher has found out few hypotheses

H₁ = Service quality is having significant association with customer perception

H₂ = Promotion efforts are having significant association with customer perception

H₃ = Price discounts are having significant association with customer perception

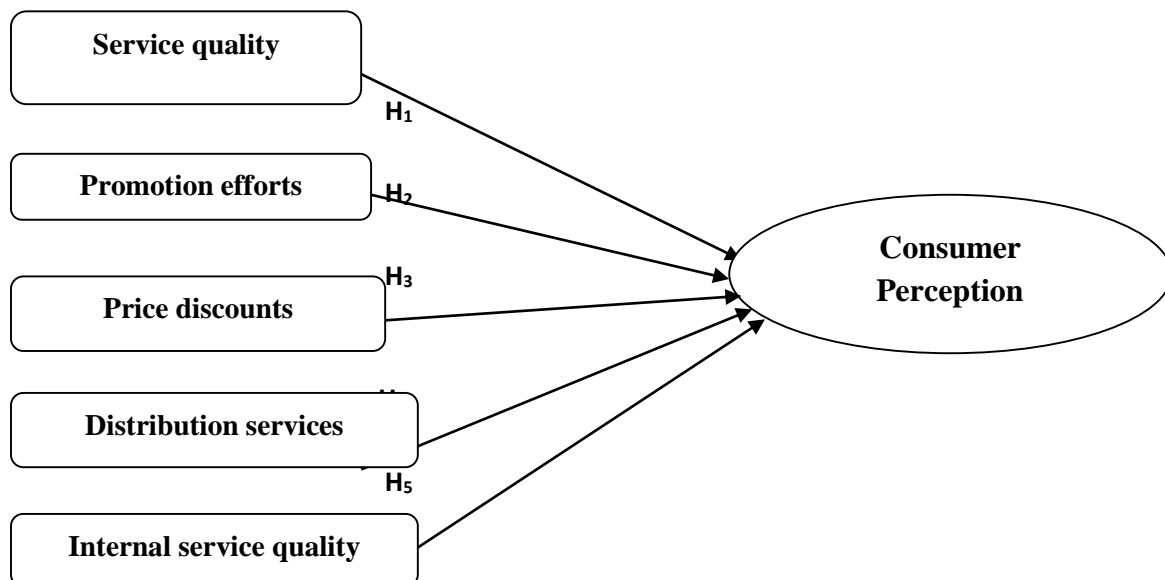
H₄ = Distribution services are having significant association with customer perception

H₅ = Internal service quality is having significant association with customer perception

Objective of the Study:

- To study the perceptions of rural consumers of West Bengal on marketing strategies adopted by various mobile service providers

Hypothesized Research Model:



This is the proposed hypothesized model for perceptions of rural consumers of West Bengal on marketing strategies adopted by various mobile service providers.

Research Methodology:

For conducting the survey in this research, the questionnaire was prepared according to existing literatures on this topic for determining perceptions of rural consumers of West Bengal on marketing strategies adopted by various mobile service providers. Constructs and items used in this study were taken directly from previous literatures and few new items were added from expert opinion. By the use of 5 point Likert type scale which is ranged from “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree”, constructs were evaluated using multiple items. In this study two stage cluster sampling under probability sampling has been used as a sampling technique. Questionnaires were distributed among 250 respondents and 212 completely filled and usable questionnaires were received. The area chosen for the study is West Bengal, which is having several prominent rural areas of India, which comprises five divisions & from their five districts have been selected and at last out of these five districts five subdivisions has been selected namely Suri, Islampur, Mekhliganj, Tehatta and Egra.

Analysis and Result:

Validity & Reliability Analysis:

The construct validity contains convergent & discriminant validity. Here between the various variables of the factors is having the strong co-relation coefficient & most of the co-relation coefficients values are in higher ranges. So, here it proves that the convergent validity exists. Though there are high co-relation coefficients between the variables of a particular factor, there are very weak correlation also exists between the one factor’s variable to another factor’s variable. Here it also proves that the discriminant validity exists.

Overall Reliability Statistics

Cronbach’s Alpha	Number of Items
.857	36

Total Cases: 212

Cronbach alpha greater than 0.70 for overall and individual factor means the reliability scaling is good under various items & from the analysis it has found that the Cronbach’s Alpha result is .857. Though the value is well above 0.70 so the researcher can conclude that the Cronbach’s Alpha result is acceptable & accordingly the researcher can proceed the further analysis. By the help of expert’s suggestions face validity and content validity have been executed.

Factor Analysis:

Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) by SPSS 21 has been used in this study. By the measurement and model, validity test and fitness of the model have been examined.

KMO and Bartlett's Test

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy.		0.813
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square	5127.352
	df	198
	Sig.	.000

Five different factors have been created with different items (above 0.5 factor loading) which are shown below in the Rotated Component Matrix. These extracted factors explain total 74.273 % of the variations. Variance explained (%) and Cronbach alpha for individual factors have been given in the following table.

Result of Factor Analysis - Rotated Component Matrix

	Components				
	Service quality	Promotion efforts	Price discounts	Distribution services	Internal service quality
Variety of services	.892				
Value added services	.853				
Billing system	.789				
Customer centric	.747				
Personalized service	.672				
Roaming facility	.586				
Innovation in sales promotion		.859			
Eye catching advertisements		.782			
Disclosing full information		.719			
Outdoor advertisements		.697			
Media selection		.658			
Free talk time			.871		
Low rates at night			.829		
Low cost SIM			.754		
High validity			.693		
Group network concessions			.605		
Customer complaint management				.779	
Congestion free network				.734	
Number of distributors				.657	
Public relations					.886
Knowledgeable & trained employees					.834
Good working environment					.759
Customer care among the employees					.694
Variance Explained	26.247	19.659	13.983	9.841	4.543
Cronbach Alpha	0.869	0.903	0.875	0.846	0.874

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.

Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization.^a

a. Rotation converged in 6 iterations.

Here Service quality, Promotion efforts, Price discounts, Distribution services and Internal service quality are the five major factors. The five factors consist of 23 important variables. In “Service

quality” related factor the most influencing variable is “Variety of services”. In rural areas people are mainly influenced by Value added services, Billing system, Customer centric, Personalized service and Roaming facilities provided by various service providers. In “Promotion efforts” related factor the most influencing variable is “Innovation in sales promotion” and after that other influencing factors are Eye catching advertisements, Disclosing full information, Outdoor advertisements and Media selection respectively. In “Price discounts” related factor the most influencing variable is “Free talk time”, Low rates at night, Low cost SIM, High validity and Group network concessions are following that. In “Distribution services” related factor the most influencing variable is “Customer complaint management” and in “Internal service quality” factor it is Public relations. Now, to find out from these factors which is the most influencing factor for consumers perceptions on marketing strategies, the researcher have used regression analysis.

Regression Analysis:

The five factors which have been identified from the Factor Analysis are, Service quality, Promotion efforts, Price discounts, Distribution services and internal service quality. Here the Consumer Perceptions on Marketing Strategies has been used as a Dependent Variable and the remaining five factors have been used as an Independent variable.

Model Summary^b

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	Durbin-Watson
1	.851 ^a	.724	.703	2.062	1.791

a. Predictors: (Constant), Service quality, Promotion efforts, Price discounts, Distribution services, Internal service quality

b. Dependent Variable: Consumer Perceptions on Marketing Strategies

ANOVA^a

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	7873.779	5	1574.955	211.687	.000 ^b
	Residual	1532.714	206	7.440		
	Total	9406.493	211			

a. Dependent Variable: Consumer Perceptions on Marketing Strategies

b. Predictors: (Constant), Service quality, Promotion efforts, Price discounts, Distribution services, Internal service quality.

Coefficients^a

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.	95.0% Confidence Interval for B		Collinearity Statistics	
	B	Std. Error				Lower Bound	Upper Bound	Tolerance	VIF
(Constant)	2.377	.530		4.487	.000	1.333	3.421		
1									
Service quality	.200	.173	.166	1.358	.000	-.141	.541	.227	1.408
Promotion efforts	.011	.095	.009	.121	.000	-.175	.198	.891	1.122
Price discounts	.088	.066	.092	1.128	.000	-.043	.218	.970	1.031
Distribution services	.040	.166	.035	.241	.000	-.366	.286	.226	1.428
Internal service quality	.085	.082	.072	1.043	.000	-.076	.247	.973	1.028

a. Dependent Variable: Consumer Perceptions on Marketing Strategies

Multi-collinearity has been checked through Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) which needs to be less than 3 for acceptability range. Here all VIF values are in acceptable range in & it concludes that the variables are free from multi-collinearity.

0.851 is the Correlation coefficient (R) for Model 1, it emphasizes an amount of correlation between the independent variables and dependent variable (Consumer Perceptions on Marketing Strategies). The R square value explains the 0.724 or 72.4% which is quite significant. Here the significance level also implies .000 significance level which means it is quite acceptable.

From the coefficient table the researcher has found that service quality factor is having highest unstandardized B value of 0.200. So it is having the highest influence factor on Consumer Perceptions on Marketing Strategies. After that the second highest will be Price discounts with the B value of 0.088. Internal service quality, Distribution services & Promotion efforts are following after that.

So, here the multiple regression equation can be expressed as,

$$\text{Consumer Perceptions on Marketing Strategies} = 2.377 + .200 X1 + .011 X2 + .088 X3 + .040 X4 + .085 X5$$

Service quality = X1

Promotion efforts = X2

Price discounts = X3

Distribution services = X4

Internal service quality = X5

Findings & Conclusion:

The findings for Consumer Perceptions on Marketing Strategies Model show that Service qualities are having significant relationship with Consumer Perceptions. Promotion efforts are having significant relationship with Consumer Perceptions. Price discounts are having significant relationship with Consumer Perceptions. Distribution services & Internal service quality is also having significant

relationship with consumer perception. These findings have consistent evidential support from previous studies. All the factors are having a positive and significant impact on Consumer Perceptions on Marketing Strategies in rural market of West Bengal. This has an evidential proof from the findings of the study. In the Indian mobile phone market, the competition among the various players had become at present more intense than ever, which was inevitable. They compete not only in providing best service and network quality by a huge amount of investment, and in network extension and upgrading, but also in customer satisfaction, customer retention and new acquisition of customers by direct and indirect price reduction. An aggressive strategy was needed to enhance the trustworthiness of the mobile phone operators by keeping the customers' best interest at heart and by providing customized services and by the exemplary behavior of the contact personnel to make the interaction a memorable experience.

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