EFFECT OF PACKAGE AND CHANNEL DIFFERENTIATION ON MARKET PERFORMANCE OF SELECTED TABLE WATER FIRMS IN LAFIA

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Abstract

The study was concerned with measuring the effect of package and channel differentiation strategies on market performance among table water companies in Lafia metropolis. Quantitative methods were utilised in the study, based on an explanatory design and a reliance on survey data obtained from a cross-section of 179 respondents via an administered questionnaire. Path modelling, through the Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM) approach, was employed in analysing the collected data. Both product and channel differentiation were found to be positive and significant in determining market performance in the study area. Findings revealed an urgent need for strategic interventions including deepened investment in distinctive product features and variants that set their table water apart from competing brands. Furthermore, firms should prioritise expanding and diversifying their sales and distribution channels to ensure their products are readily accessible across various points of sale, including retail outlets, supermarkets, local vendors, and online platforms. Strategic partnerships with retailers and distributors should also be nurtured through relationship management initiatives to maximise product visibility.

Keywords: Channel differentiation, Differentiation strategy, Lafia, market-based view, product differentiation, Table water.

Introduction

Firm performance is widely recognised as a key indicator of organisational success, reflecting the extent to which a firm achieves its strategic and operational objectives in relation to a number of indices including profitability, market share, sales growth, and customer satisfaction. In competitive business environments, performance serves not only as a measure of efficiency but also as a determinant of long-term survival and sustainability (Echo, 2023). Within the manufacturing sector, and particularly in consumer goods industries such as table water production, firm performance is directly influenced by how effectively companies position themselves to attract and retain customers amidst intense market rivalry.

Achieving high levels of performance, especially in a highly generic market such as the table water industry in Lafia, necessitates the application of competitive strategies specifically geared towards standing out in the midst of competitors. In such a market, as pointed out by Emir and Santoso (2023), with a number of firms competing with similar products, it is crucial that businesses understand their position in the market, identify opportunities, and make informed decisions to enhance sales for the purpose of achieving superior performance. Through package differentiation, in highlighting unique features, qualities and benefits in market offerings; and distribution channel differentiation via unique or innovative ways to deliver products to customers, companies can gain customer attention and engagement, which are crucial to revenue growth. Purwatiningsih et al., (2023) considers sales and revenue generation to be the primary means of boosting profits, so that it is crucial for businesses to identify avenues to enhance sales, such as offering high-quality products, diverse product options to cater to customer preferences, ensuring product availability and accessibility, and maintaining competitive pricing.

Statement of the Problem

Drinking water commercially packaged in bottles sourced either directly from natural springs or subjected to purification processes, is manufactured by a number of companies in Lafia, including Almari Enterprises Nigeria Limited, Daewood Table Water and Dan-Safiya Table Water, all operating within a generic market. The highly competitive market presents a situation where these businesses fiercely compete for customer patronage with highly similar products, which begs the question of how table water manufacturers can get customer attention while offering remarkably similar products and stay ahead of market rivalry.

However, there is an acute dearth of pertinent literature in the context of the table water industry in Lafia, that has limited proper understanding of how differentiation strategies translate to achieving market performance. Related studies such as Eboh et al., (2024), and Adimo and Osodo (2017) have failed to carry out empirical inquires this context, thereby contributing to a gap; geographic and market, which the current research aimed to bridge. In achieving this, the following hypotheses were formulated for testing.

Research Hypotheses

$H0_1$: Package differentiation strategy does not have significant effect on market performance of table water firms in Lafia.

$H0_2$: Distribution differentiation strategy does not have significant effect on market performance of table water firms in Lafia.

Literature Review

Differentiation Strategy

Differentiation refers to a firm's effort to provide unique market offerings that stand out from those of its competitors by offering something unique. The aim is to provide value that customers appreciate enough to pay more for, instead of simply trying to offer the lowest price. As highlighted by Akoi et al., (2021), important ways through which businesses can set themselves apart include distinctive features and differentiation in distribution channels.

Package Differentiation

The concept of package differentiation refers to the deliberate efforts made by a firm to distinguish products from competing offerings in the market, including those produced by the same firm. According to Aggarwal (2025), this involves distinguishing a product based on its unique qualities such as its physical characteristics, functionality, or durability, targeted towards a specific market segment. Package differentiation is not limited to the physical aspects of a product alone; it also encompasses strategic efforts aimed at influencing consumer preferences and guiding their purchasing decisions in favour of the differentiated product (Dirisu, 2023).

In essence, through effective package differentiation, firms are able to shift competition away from price-based rivalry, thereby reducing their exposure to potentially damaging price wars within the industry (Adewale, Adesola, & Oyewale, 2023). Furthermore, package differentiation serves as a valuable competitive strategy, enabling firms to offer products that cater to the specific needs and preferences of individual customers. As Nseobot et al. (2023) noted, when done effectively, package differentiation can enhance customer satisfaction, brand loyalty, and ultimately lead to sustained business growth.

Distribution Channel Differentiation

Distribution channel differentiation refers to the strategic approach businesses use to create varied and efficient pathways for delivering their products or services to customers. This entails strategies to ensure better positioning, maintain market visibility and support improved sales, considering that firm's marketing channels are characterized by different related costs (Soe et al., 2015). However, distinguishing those dynamics influencing firm channel decisions along with easing of related constraints is also significant in efforts of channel differentiation to more importantly achieve visibility of its products in the market (Aremu & Akinwamide, 2018).

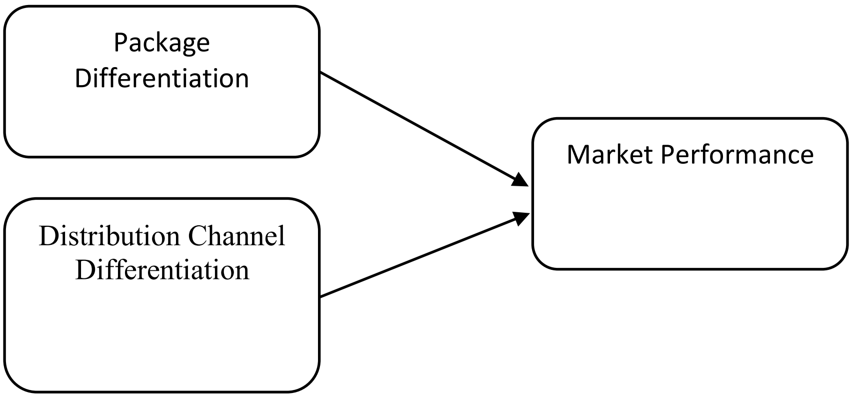
As Ehiedu (2020) explains, a well-structured distribution strategy enhances brand presence and sustains competitive advantage. Many firms adopt multi-layered approaches, collaborating with wholesalers, retailers, and other intermediaries to efficiently reach end consumers. For instance, a manufacturer may distribute products through bulk suppliers (wholesalers), who then supply smaller retailers, ultimately making goods available to the public. This tiered system helps bridge gaps in product availability, communication, and geographical reach (Ehiedu, 2020; Kamau, 2023). Moreover, an effective distribution strategy minimises delays and ensures timely delivery, addressing the spatial and temporal gaps between production and consumption. By leveraging differentiated channels, firms can cater to diverse consumer needs while maximising market penetration.

Market Performance

Markert performance refers to the ability of products in market to gain patronage which, consequently, enhances revenue generation and drives overall business success. It constitutes a central component of business performance that reflects commercial effectiveness of a firm's operations. As defined by Zahara et al., (2023), it reflects the overall effectiveness of a company's marketing efforts, typically evaluated using key metrics such as sales revenue, market share, customer satisfaction, and brand awareness.

Marketing performance demonstrates the ability of a firm to effectively engage its target audience, satisfy customer needs, and maintain a competitive edge through innovative strategies. According to Chong and Ali (2022), marketing performance encapsulates the outcomes of a firm's marketing initiatives, serving as a vital benchmark for assessing progress towards organisational objectives. This performance metric provides a clear indication of the extent to which marketing initiatives translate into tangible outcomes that drive business growth, thereby acting as a diagnostic tool for evaluating effectiveness and informing future marketing decisions.

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework of the Study



***Note*. Researcher's Compilation.**

Package differentiation and Market Performance

Using an explanatory research framework, Eboh et al. (2024) analysed survey data from 126 employees of Fast-Moving Consumer Good firms in Abraka, Delta State. Findings from a regression analysis carried out indicated product differentiation was positive and significant in determining sales performance among the firms. In a related study, Elikwu and Mohammed (2020) applied multiple regression analysis to survey data obtained from a cross-section of 193 employees of small manufacturing firms and found package differentiation strategy to be a positive and significant predictor of market performance.

Mwangi and Murigi (2025) found package differentiation to have positive, but non-significant effect on market performance from regression analysis of survey data from a sample of 117 employees of selected insurance companies in Nairobi City County in Kenya. In the study conducted by Nseobot et al., (2023) focused on MTN Nigeria in Uyo, package differentiation was also found to be a positive and significant predictor of market performance.

Distribution Channel Differentiation and Market Performance

Sheikh and Kiiru (2023) found the effect of channel differentiation on market performance to be positive and statistically significant in an empirical study carried out among 133 managers and employees of eight industrial and allied Sector enterprises. Adimo and Osodo (2017) used a correlational design in investigating the relationship between distribution channel differentiation and market performance in Sameer Africa Ltd located in Nairobi, Kenya. Findings from the study confirmed a positive and significant association between channel differentiation and market performance. In their study on five-star hotels in Indonesia, Lestari et al., (2019) also found the effect of channel differentiation on market performance to be positive and significant.

Theoretical Framework

Market-Based View (MBV) Theory

The Market-Based View (MBV) theory, originally advocated by Michael Porter in the 1980s, argues that the primary determinant of a firm's success lies in its strategic positioning within the external market environment (Porter, 1985). The MBV provides an appropriate theoretical lens for examining how these firms strategically position themselves in a competitive environment to outperform rivals. In the context of the study, both product and channel differentiation are considered strategic responses to external competitive pressures and are central to a firm's market positioning.

Table water firms in Lafia operate in a highly competitive and relatively undifferentiated market where products are often perceived as similar. Under such conditions, by applying the MBV framework, the study can critically assess how the selected firms utilise product innovation and channel strategies to achieve overall market performance. MBV underscores the idea that strategic choices, such as differentiation, must align with prevailing market structures and consumer preferences in order to yield competitive advantages (Grant, 2021). The theory also posits that firms that fail to adapt to changing market dynamics or that employ generic, undifferentiated strategies are likely to perform poorly in comparison to those that align their strategic decisions with market conditions. As such, in the context of Lafia's growing urban population and increased demand for safe, packaged drinking water, product and channel differentiation become vital competitive tools. This makes the MBV a suitable and robust theoretical framework for exploring the empirical relationship between these differentiation strategies and the market performance of table water firms in the city.

Materials and Method

In line with the direction of the study, an explanatory design was adopted to enable the examination of causal relationships between exogenous constructs of Package Differentiation and Channel Differentiation, and the endogenous construct of Market Performance. The study relied on a purposive sample of 209 respondents, made up of managers, distribution personnel and wholesalers selected across 19 table water companies in Lafia - Almari Enterprises Nigeria Limited, Daewood Table Water, Daily Natural Water, Dan-Safiya Table Water, Floxy Table Water, Hikma Table Water, K-Danrimi Table Water, Lagwada Pure Water Lafia, Lakache Sachet and Table Water Company, M.Mailafiya Table Water, Makamzy Table Water, Marverous Table Water, Namaliya Table Water, Nasara Spring Water Nigeria Limited, Omolijo Table Water, Rhemacent Table Water Ltd, Rolama Table Water, Rufaidah Premium Table Water, Ta Alamis Table Water and Youngstar Table Water.
From each company, the manager (or owner), five affiliated distribution personnel and five wholesalers were selected to take part in a questionnaire survey involving the administration of an adapted closed-ended questionnaire. model constructs were evaluated based on the 5-point Likert scale format. The administration of the instrument was done with the help of three research assistants. The instrument was tested for validity and reliability, using both face and content measures in the first instance, and the Cronbach's Alpha statistic as measure of internal consistency of constructs in the second. The tests were facilitated by a pretest involving verified responses from 47 respondents from a pilot study in Karu Local Government Area (LGA). Feedback from the pilot study was used to refine the instrument. Internal consistency was confirmed at values of above 0.7. In line with the causal design of the study, construct relationships were evaluated using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM) through the application of the SmartPLS Statistical software (version 3).

Results and Discussion

A retained number of 179 sets of responses was achieved from the cross-sectional survey conducted in the course of the study following data screening. This reflected a response rate of 86%. Survey data obtained showed generally low performance across all constructs suggesting a need to rebalance its strategic priorities to ensure a more holistic approach to competition (see table 1). Channel Differentiation emerged as the weakest area, with particularly concerning scores in distribution accessibility (CHD1: 1.65) and logistics efficiency (CHD5: 1.66). These findings paint a picture of underdeveloped distribution networks where most firms struggle to ensure reliable product availability, potentially losing sales to competitors with better channel execution.

Package Differentiation showed slightly better but still inadequate performance, with quality perception (PRD2: 2.33) and product innovation (PRD5: 2.33) as relative bright spots. However, the consistently sub-3.0 scores indicate most brands fail to meaningfully distinguish themselves in terms of features, packaging, or product variety.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics

		Missing	Mean	Median	Standard Deviation
CHD1	Distribution channels are more accessible than those of competitors.	0	1.652	2.000	1.091
CHD2	We use exclusive distribution strategies to enhance market reach.	0	2.325	2.000	1.461
CHD3	The table water firm has strong relationships with retailers and distributors.	0	1.829	2.000	1.282
CHD4	We employ multiple sales channels (e.g., online, retail, wholesale).	0	1.742	2.000	1.233
CHD5	Our logistics and delivery system are more efficient than competitors'	0	1.664	2.000	1.151
MTP1	Firm has achieved consistent growth in sales volume over the past year.	0	2.071	2.000	1.091
MTP2	Revenues have improved in recent years.	0	1.905	2.000	1.363
MTP3	Customer retention rates for our table water brand are high.	0	1.841	2.000	1.172
MTP4	Brand enjoys strong awareness among consumers in Lafia.	0	1.692	2.000	1.105
MTP5	Distributors/retailers are satisfied with product's market performance	0	2.126	2.000	0.955
PRD1	The table water has unique features that distinguish it from competitors.	0	2.246	2.000	0.99
PRD2	The brand is perceived as superior in quality compared to competitors.	0	2.329	2.000	1.428
PRD3	There is investment in innovative packaging designs to stand out in the market.	0	2.230	2.000	1.448
PRD4	Customers recognize product as distinct from other table water brands.	0	2.135	2.000	1.422
PRD5	There is frequently introduction of new product variants to meet diverse consumer needs.	0	2.329	2.000	1.373

Note. Extracted from SmartPLS Output.

Market Performance metrics show troubling stagnation, with all items clustering near neutral (2.0). The sales growth score (MTP1: 2.07) and profitability metric (MTP2: 1.91) suggest most firms are barely maintaining—rather than growing—their market position. Even distributor satisfaction (MTP5: 2.13), the highest scoring item, remains unimpressive

The PLS-SEM analysis carried out comprised both measurement model and structural model assessment as highlighted by Hair et al. (2022). In evaluating measurement model accuracy, both reliability and validity measures were applied. Measurement model reliability was confirmed with satisfactory indicator and internal consistency statistics, as contained in tables 2 and 3.

Table 2: *Loading Values for Indicator Reliability*

	Loading	Loading^2	STDEV	t	p
CHD1 <- Channel Differentiation Strategy	0.829	0.829	0.012	71.388	0.000
CHD2 <- Channel Differentiation Strategy	0.925	0.925	0.006	157.089	0.000
CHD3 <- Channel Differentiation Strategy	0.862	0.860	0.018	48.195	0.000
CHD4 <- Channel Differentiation Strategy	0.766	0.764	0.030	25.225	0.000
MTP1 <- Market Performance	0.832	0.832	0.011	72.972	0.000
MTP2 <- Market Performance	0.851	0.851	0.012	69.645	0.000
MTP3 <- Market Performance	0.799	0.798	0.024	32.928	0.000
MTP4 <- Market Performance	0.758	0.756	0.029	25.837	0.000
PRD1 <- Package Differentiation Strategy	0.870	0.870	0.011	76.332	0.000
PRD2 <- Package Differentiation Strategy	0.876	0.877	0.011	77.706	0.000
PRD4 <- Package Differentiation Strategy	0.764	0.763	0.027	28.058	0.000
PRD5 <- Package Differentiation Strategy	0.778	0.778	0.025	31.269	0.000

Note. Extracted from SmartPLS Output.

Indicator reliability was established at the 0.708 threshold, with squared loadings of at least 0.5 and statistical significance at 5% error rate. All indicators that did not meet these criteria (CHD5, MTP5 and PRD3) were removed.

Model constructs were also determined to be internally consistent as confirmed by satisfactory Cronbach's Alpha and Composite Reliability values (> 0.7) as table 3 shows. In terms of validity, convergent validity was determined with the use of Average Variance Extracted (AVE). AVE values of more than 0.5 obtained for all constructs upheld convergent validity for all cases (see table 3).

Table 3: Internal Consistency Statistics and Convergent Validity

	Cronbach's Alpha	rho_A	Composite Reliability	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)
Channel Differentiation Strategy	0.870	0.896	0.910	0.718
Market Performance	0.828	0.845	0.885	0.658
Package Differentiation Strategy	0.845	0.871	0.894	0.678

Note. Extracted from SmartPLS Output.

In addition to convergent validity, discriminant validity was employed in determining the uniqueness of constructs. In determining discriminant validity, the Heterotrait Monotrait ratio (HTMT) was employed, with computed values contained in table 4. As can be seen, HTMT values in all cases were determined to be less than 0.9, confirming the presence of discriminant validity in all cases.

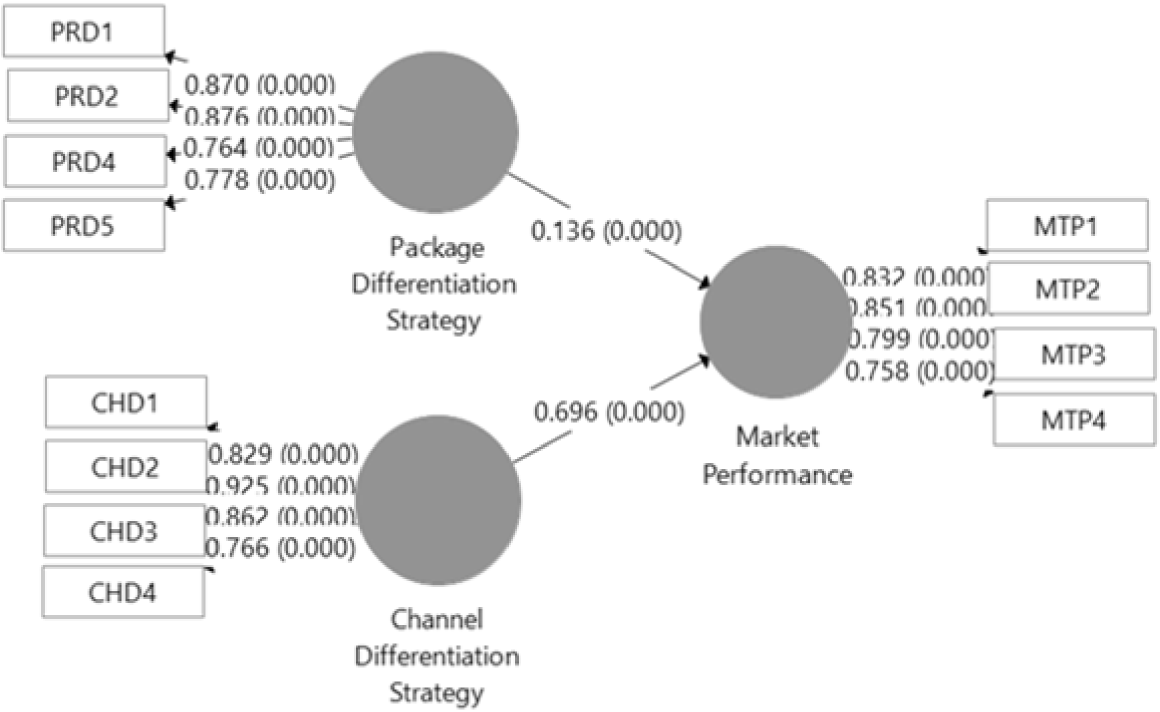
Table 4: Heterotrait Monotrait ratio (HTMT)

	Channel Differentiation Strategy	Market Performance
Competitive Advantage	0.455	
Package Differentiation Strategy	0.542	0.546

Note. Extracted from SmartPLS Output.

Figure 1 contains the estimated path model for the study showing direct relationships between exogenous constructs and the endogenous construct of Competitive Advantage. The estimation conducted was achieved via a bootstrapping process involving 10,000 subsamples.

Figure 1: Estimated Path Model



Note. SmartPLS Output.

To ensure that multicollinearity was not a problem in the study, VIF values were evaluated for the inner model, as presented in table 5. All values were determined to be less than 3, indicating that multicollinearity was not an issue.

Table 5: Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) (Inner Model)

	Market Performance
Channel Differentiation Strategy	1.313
Package Differentiation Strategy	1.313

Note. SmartPLS Output.

The explanatory power of the model was examined via the Coefficient of Multiple Determination (R^2). The computed R^2 value is shown in table 6. As it can be seen, about 59% of variations in the endogenous construct (Market Performance) was estimated to be attributable to changes in exogenous constructs. This indicated a strong in-sample prediction capacity of the estimated model.

Table 6: In-Sample Predictive Power

	R Square	R Square Adjusted
Market Performance	0.594	0.592

Note. SmartPLS Output.

All estimated path coefficients were found to be positive and statistically significant, in agreement with a priori expectation. Obtained values and associated test of significance parameters (t and p values) are shown in table 7.

Table 7: *Estimated Path Coefficients*

	β	Mean	STDEV	t	p	H0 Decision
Package Differentiation Strategy -> Market Performance	0.136	0.136	0.030	4.572	0.000	Reject
Channel Differentiation Strategy -> Market Performance	0.696	0.698	0.025	27.373	0.000	Reject

Note. SmartPLS Output.

Based on the PLS-SEM estimation results, the null hypothesis in both cases (Package Differentiation Strategy -> Market Performance, Channel Differentiation Strategy -> Market Performance) were not accepted.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The study showed that the table water market in Lafia suffers from commoditisation, with undifferentiated products moving through inefficient channels to produce mediocre market results. Findings revealed an urgent need for strategic interventions across product development, distribution management, and brand building to break out of this cycle. The positive and significant effect of package differentiation strategy on market performance ($\beta = 0.136$, $p = 0.000$) implies that firms should deepen their investment in distinctive product features that set their table water apart from competing brands. This could involve enhancing product attributes such as taste, purity, or mineral composition, as well as adopting eco-friendly or ergonomically designed packaging that appeals to health-conscious and environmentally aware consumers. Additionally, firms should actively innovate by introducing new product variants tailored to emerging consumer needs, such as flavoured options or convenient portable sizes, thereby expanding their appeal to different market segments. Effective communication of these unique selling propositions through consistent branding and advertising would also strengthen consumer perception and recognition, helping to sustain demand and reinforce market positioning.

On the other hand, the strong and highly significant influence of channel differentiation on market performance ($\beta = 0.696$, $p = 0.000$) underscores its central role as a key strategic driver for business growth. Thus, firms should prioritise expanding and diversifying their sales and distribution channels to ensure their products are readily accessible across various points of sale, including retail outlets, supermarkets, local vendors, and online platforms. Strategic partnerships with retailers and distributors should be nurtured through relationship management initiatives to maximise product visibility. Investments in logistics infrastructure and delivery systems are equally critical, as efficient and timely delivery can enhance customer satisfaction and reduce operational bottlenecks. Furthermore, the adoption of exclusive or semi-exclusive distribution rights in high-demand areas may help to secure strategic advantage and reduce direct competition.

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