

## COMPETITIVE AGGRESSIVENESS AND CUSTOMER PATRONAGE OF TELECOMMUNICATION FIRMS IN RIVERS STATE

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This study investigates the effect of Competitive Aggressiveness on Customer Patronage of telecommunication firms in Rivers State, Nigeria. The study used a cross-sectional survey research design to administer self-completing questionnaire to 369 customers of four major telecommunication firms with branches in Rivers State, Nigeria. Of the 369 questionnaires distributed, 309 were returned, 300 of which were fully completed and used for data analysis. The reliability of the research instrument was analyzed using Cronbach's alpha on the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). The collected data were analyzed using Structural Equation modeling (SEM) technique on AMOS software, version 23. The results of the analyses revealed that Competitive Aggressiveness has a significant positive effect on the three measures of Customer Patronage (Customer Satisfaction, Referrals, and Repeat Patronage). These results underscore the importance of competitive aggressiveness in fostering customer loyalty and driving business growth in highly competitive markets. Telecom firms in Rivers State can leverage this knowledge to develop strategies to effectively attract and retain customers.*

**KEYWORDS: Competitive Aggressiveness, Customer Patronage, Customer Satisfaction, Referrals, Repeat Patronage, Telecommunication Firms**

### **INTRODUCTION**

The telecommunications industry has emerged as one of the most dynamic and rapidly evolving sectors globally. According to Osarenkhoe (2010), this sector is known for its intense competition, technological innovation, and aggressive marketing strategies. In Nigeria, the telecommunications sector has experienced unprecedented growth since the liberalization of the industry in 2001. Today the sector has been transformed from a monopolistic state-controlled entity to a highly competitive marketplace with multiple service providers vying for market dominance (Ndukwe, 2005). This transformation has fundamentally altered the competitive landscape, compelling telecommunications firms to adopt increasingly aggressive competitive strategies to increase their customer patronage.

Competitive aggressiveness is defined as the extent to which firms engage in direct and intense rivalry with competitors through pricing strategies, service differentiation, promotional activities, and market positioning (Ferrier, 2001). Over the years, the four major telecom operators - MTN, Airtel, Globacom, and 9mobile have consistently demonstrated high levels of competitive aggressiveness. This is evident in their price wars, aggressive marketing campaigns, network expansion initiatives, and innovative service offerings (Oni & Ayo, 2010). This competitive intensity has been particularly pronounced in Rivers State, one of Nigeria's most economically significant states, where the presence of oil and gas industries has created

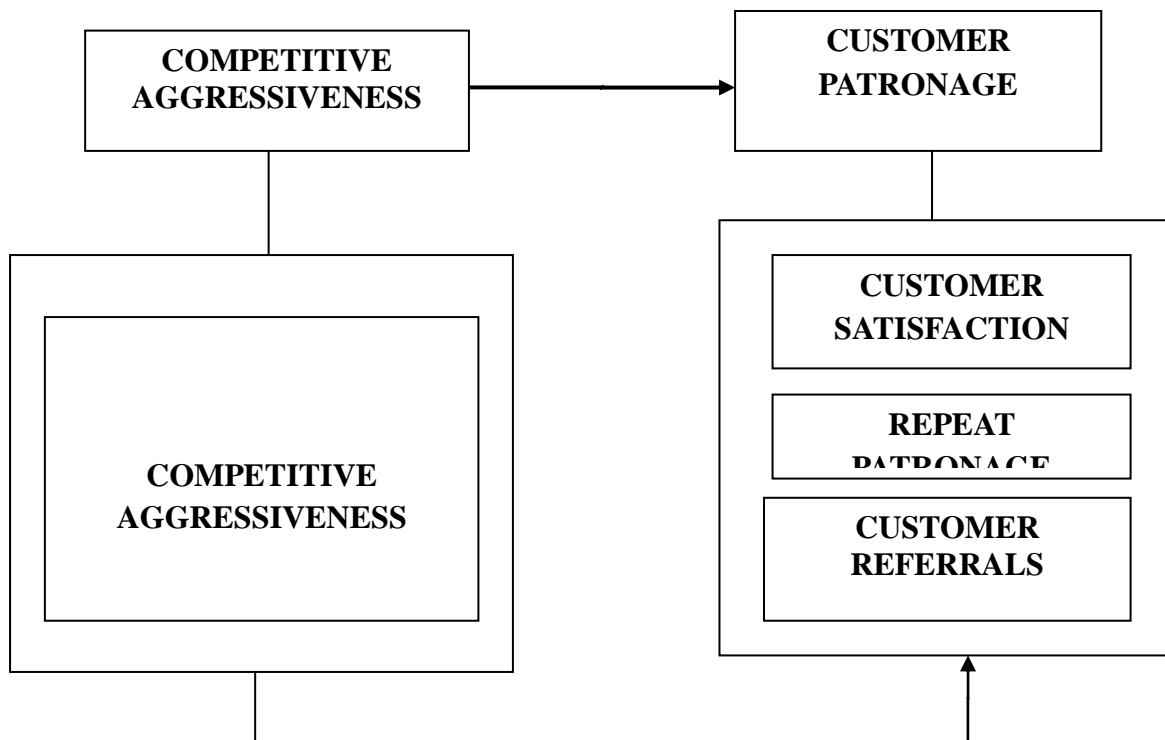
a sophisticated telecommunications market with diverse customer segments and varying service demands.

Customer patronage, conceptualized through the dimensions of customer satisfaction, repeat patronage, and customer referral behavior, represents the ultimate measure of competitive success in service industries (Anderson & Mittal, 2000). Customer patronage is central to the success of any business. Customer satisfaction is basic in building long-term relationships with clients, as satisfied customers are more likely to make repeat purchases and recommend services to others (Kotler & Keller, 2016).

Previous research has established that competitive strategies significantly influence customer behavior in various service contexts (Cronin et al., 2000). However, there still exists limited empirical evidence regarding the specific relationship between competitive aggressiveness and customer patronage dimensions in the Nigerian telecommunications sector. Given the dynamic nature of Nigeria's telecommunications market, which is characterized by evolving regulatory policies, technological advancements such as 4G and 5G deployment, and changing customer expectations, there is the need for a contemporary empirical investigation.

This study addresses this identified research gap by examining the effect of competitive aggressiveness on customer patronage of telecommunications firms in Rivers State, Nigeria. Rivers State presents a unique context for examining the relationship between competitive aggressiveness and customer patronage in the telecommunications sector. The presence of all major telecommunications operators, including MTN Nigeria, Airtel Nigeria, Globacom, and 9mobile in Rivers State, provides an ideal setting for analyzing how competitive behaviors influence customer patronage patterns across different market segments and service categories. Specifically, the research investigates how competitive aggressiveness influences customer satisfaction, repeat patronage, and customer referral behavior. The study's significance lies in its potential to provide telecommunications managers with empirical insights for developing effective competitive strategies that enhance customer patronage.

**Conceptual Framework**



**Fig 1.0 Conceptual Framework of Competitive Aggressiveness and Customer Patronage**Source : Adapted from Linyiru & Ketyenya (2017), Bii et al. (2023) for Competitive Aggressiveness and Nwankpa & Onuoha (2020) for the measures of customer patronage

**Competitive Aggressiveness**

Competitive Aggressiveness is a key aspect of Entrepreneurial Orientation. As defined by Lumpkin and Dess (1996), it refers to a company's tendency to actively and forcefully challenge its competitors to either enter a market or enhance its position, essentially aiming to surpass industry competitors. This definition highlights the confrontational and proactive nature of competitive actions intended to secure a competitive edge through direct engagement with rivals. Building on this idea, Covin and Slevin (1989) described Competitive Aggressiveness as the vigor with which a company strives to outperform its industry competitors, marked by a combative posture toward competitors and a strong reaction to competitive threats. Expanding on this perspective, Chen and Hambrick (1995) developed a framework that sees competitive aggressiveness as including both offensive moves (initiatives to gain an edge) and defensive reactions (responses to threats), offering a comprehensive view of competitive behavior in dynamic markets. According to Bleeker (2011) in Bii et al. (2023), Competitive Aggressiveness highlights an organization's proactive and innovative character, portraying it as a managerial mindset and a firm's readiness to seek out, confront, and surpass its competitors through a mix of innovative strategies and proactive measures. In the telecommunications sector, competitive aggressiveness is evident through strategic behaviors and tactical initiatives aimed at capturing market share and customer loyalty. Hughes and Morgan (2007) identified several aspects of Competitive Aggressiveness relevant to service industries, including pricing aggressiveness. According to Slater and Narver (1994),

organizations exhibiting high competitive aggressiveness are more likely to position themselves favorably in the market, thereby influencing customer perceptions and behaviors.

### **Customer patronage**

Customer patronage is a multifaceted concept which has been explored by scholars from diverse perspectives. Basically, it represents the ongoing support and loyalty customers show towards a business or brand by their repeated purchases and positive behavioral intentions. Dick and Basu (1994) view customer patronage as consumers' propensity to consistently purchase from a particular brand over time. Fournier (1998) defines customer patronage in terms of brand relationship quality, suggesting customers view brands as relational partners, and this influences their patronage level. This emotional attachment can create "brand love," and also sustain customers' patronage despite competitors' offerings (Batra et al., 2012). Jacoby and Chestnut (1978) noted that customer patronage includes repeat purchasing, resistance to competitors, and positive word-of-mouth communication. From a service quality perspective of Zeithaml et al., (1996), patronage intentions are influenced by perceived service quality and organizational value proposition. Morgan and Hunt (1994) viewed patronage from customer relationships, while Anderson and Sullivan (1993) linked it to customer satisfaction, noting satisfied customers show higher repurchase rates. Researchers have measured customer patronage differently. Awah (2015) used repeat purchases, customer retention, and referrals, while Ogbuji et al. (2016) employed satisfaction and referrals. This study used Repeat Patronage, Customer Satisfaction, and Referrals as measures.

### **Customer Satisfaction**

Customer satisfaction is a major indicator of customer patronage. It is an indicator of the extent to which customers perceive that their expectations have been fulfilled or surpassed by a company's offerings (Oliver, 1999). Fornell et al. (1996) describe customer satisfaction as an evaluative construct that encompasses both cognitive and affective responses to service experiences. This evaluation tends to subsequently shape future behavioral intentions and decisions regarding the continuation of relationships. In the context of competitive aggressiveness, firms that strive to differentiate themselves through innovative service offerings and user-friendly experiences are likely to enhance customer satisfaction. Empirical studies suggest that satisfied customers are more inclined to exhibit loyalty and engage in positive word-of-mouth behaviors (Anderson & Sullivan, 1993). Within the telecommunications industry, customer satisfaction is realized when customer expectations concerning network quality, customer service, pricing, and service features are met or exceeded. (Santouridis & Trivellas (2010).

### **Customer referrals**

Customer referrals serve as a key indicator of customer patronage, reflecting the likelihood of satisfied customers recommending services to others. This behavior not only signals customer loyalty but also acts as a catalyst for acquiring new customers. Reichheld (2003) posited that customer referrals are the ultimate measure of loyalty, suggesting that a customer's willingness to recommend services to friends and family is the strongest evidence of genuine satisfaction and commitment. Satisfied customers are more inclined to refer others to a service provider, effectively becoming brand ambassadors. Companies that engage in competitive strategies, such as offering referral incentives and loyalty programs, can further

encourage this behavior. Referral customers generally demonstrate higher retention rates, increased usage, and greater profitability compared to those acquired through traditional marketing channels. Consequently, generating referrals is a critical strategic priority for telecommunications firms (Schmitt et al., 2011).

### **Repeat Patronage**

Repeat patronage refers to customers returning for additional purchases after their initial experience with a service provider. This is a vital component of customer loyalty and profitability (Reichheld & Schefter, 2000). Research shows customers who experience satisfaction are more likely to become repeat customers (Kumar et al., 2010). Repeat purchases measure brand loyalty. Usually, firms with higher repeat purchase values have well-retained customers and higher profitability due to lower customer acquisition costs. These firms enjoy enhanced customer value as their customers occupy higher levels on the loyalty ladder. Achieving repeat purchases is a primary objective of most firms, as it indicates long-term business sustainability and customer satisfaction. In telecommunications, repeat patronage manifests through contract renewals, service upgrades, additional subscriptions, and sustained usage patterns.

### **Theoretical review: The Resource-Based View (RBV)**

The theoretical foundation of this study is grounded in the Resource-Based View (RBV). The RBV underscores the pivotal role of a firm's resources in achieving a competitive advantage and executing corporate strategies. According to this perspective, the assets, capabilities, organizational processes, characteristics, information, and knowledge that a firm controls enable it to implement strategies that enhance both efficiency and effectiveness (Barney & Clark, 2007). The RBV offers a theoretical framework for understanding competitive aggressiveness, positing that a firm's competitive behaviors are shaped by its unique resource endowments and capabilities (Barney, 1991; Wernerfelt, 1984). From this standpoint, competitive aggressiveness is characterized by the strategic deployment of firm-specific resources to establish and maintain competitive advantages through direct confrontation with industry rivals. This theoretical foundation highlights the significance of organizational capabilities, including marketing capabilities, technological resources, and managerial competencies, in determining the intensity and effectiveness of competitive behaviors.

### **Empirical Review**

Some empirical studies have linked the dimensions of competitive aggressiveness and the measures of customer patronage. Ogwo and Igwe (2012) conducted a questionnaire survey of 308 university lecturers in South-South Nigeria to investigate the key factors that influence the patronage of mobile phone services. The results of Spearman rank correlation and multiple regression analyses indicated that good quality service is critical to inducing patronage or keeping a consumer with a brand of telecommunication provider. This study found a positive and significant relationship between service quality and customer intention to use mobile phone services. In addition, Abioro and Okeowo (202) examined the effect of promotional mix on customer patronage among telecom subscribers in Lagos and Ogun states, Nigeria. Data were collected using a questionnaire and analyzed using a multiple regression technique. The results indicate that advertising, sales promotion; public relations, personal selling, and direct marketing have significant effects on the patronage of mobile

telecommunication networks in Lagos and Ogun states, Nigeria. Similarly, in Nsikan-Abasi and Dafiovo (2015), a case study carried out on Etisalat Mobile services investigated the effect of Etisalat's marketing communication activities on consumers' patronage of the network in Uyo, AkwaIbom State, Nigeria. Based on responses obtained from Etisalats' subscribers through interviews and a questionnaire survey, the Pearson product-moment correlation analysis indicated that Etisalats' deployment of integrated marketing communication strategies influenced subscribers to make both initial and continuous purchases of its products/services. In another study in the telecommunication industry, Karjaluoto et al. (2012) carried out a study that analyzed data from over 3,000 customers across six countries in Europe, and found out that firms employing aggressive competitive strategies (pricing and service innovation) achieved higher customer acquisition rates.

In a related study, Nwinkinaka and Poi (2023) examined the relationship between customer care practices and customer patronage of Telecommunications firms in Portharcourt. Data obtained through a questionnaire survey conducted on 20 top managers of four major telecommunication firms in Portharcourt were analyzed using the Pearson product moment correlation method. The results indicate that customer care practices influence customer patronage using repeat purchases as a measure. In another related study, Chukundah (2023) examined the influence of relationship marketing on customer patronage of hotels in Portharcourt. Data analysis of responses obtained from managers of 50 registered hotels indicated that relationship marketing has a significant positive influence on customer patronage of hotels in Port Harcourt, in terms of customer repeat visits and loyalty. Anucha (2019) investigated the effect of service differentiation on customer patronage in Nigeria's hospitality industry. Based on data collected from 154 customers of ten selected hotels in Port Harcourt, the Spearman Rank Order Correlation analysis indicated that both quality differentiation and price differentiation have a significant influence on the repeat patronage of hospitality organizations.

### **Research Hypotheses**

Therefore, the following hypotheses were tested in this study:

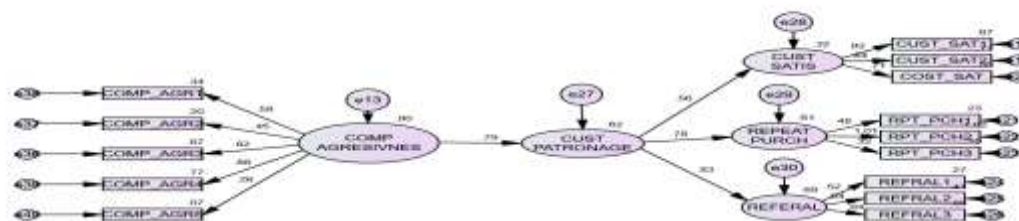
- H<sub>01</sub>: There is no significant relationship between Competitive Aggressiveness and Customer Satisfaction in Telecommunication Firms in Rivers State, Nigeria.
- H<sub>02</sub>: There is no significant relationship between Competitive Aggressiveness and Repeat Patronage in Telecommunication Firms in Rivers State, Nigeria.
- H<sub>03</sub>: There is no significant relationship between Competitive Aggressiveness and Customer Referrals in Telecommunication Firms in Rivers State, Nigeria.
- H<sub>04</sub>: There is no significant relationship between Customer Patronage and the combined measures of Customer Patronage in Telecommunication Firms in Rivers state Nigeria

### **METHODOLOGY**

This study used a cross-sectional design. The population of the study consists of customers of the four major telecommunication firms with offices in Portharcourt, Rivers State Nigeria. These telecommunications firms include MTN, GLOBACOM, AIRTEL and 9MOBILE. Since the population of the customers of these banks is non-finite, this study used the Cochran formula to determine the sample size. Guided by Amadi (2021), the study carried out a preliminary

survey to determine the number of respondents who were subscribers of the services of these telecom firms. Out of the twenty (20) questionnaires that were administered on randomly selected respondents, twelve (12) persons answered affirmatively. This gave a probability of 0.6 which was substituted in the Cochran formula for infinite population. The result of the calculation gave 369. Therefore, the questionnaire was administered to 369 customers from the four telecom firms. Therefore Ninety three (93) copies of the questionnaire were shared to customers at the respective regional headquarters of the telecommunications firms in Rivers state. The scale used in the questionnaire was adapted from the works of Linyiru & Ketyenya (2017), and Bii et al. (2023) for Competitive Aggressiveness. The measures of customer patronage was adapted from Nwankpa & Onuoha (2020). Of the 369 distributed questionnaires, 309 copies of them were returned. Of these, nine (9) were discarded because of incomplete information. Only 300 questionnaires were found to be useful and were therefore used in the data analysis. The questionnaire used for the study variables was tested for reliability prior to use. The data was analyzed using the structural equation modeling (SEM) technique. The results are shown below.

**FIG 1. Structural Model of Competitive Aggressiveness and the three measures of Customer Patronage**



the relationship between competitive aggressiveness and customer patronage is investigated using the structural model shown in Fig. 1 above.

The model fit yielded a CMIN/DF of  $2.79 < 3$ ; CFI of  $0.976 > 0.95$ ; GFI of  $0.968 > 0.900$ ; RMR of  $0.024 < 0.08$ . This indicates that the multiple fit indices were within acceptable levels, as recommended by Hair et al. (2010) and Bryme (2002), and the model was considered to be of good fit.

**Table 1.0 The Structural Model of Competitive Aggressiveness and the measures of Customer patronage**

Relationship	Standardi zed Regressio n Weight (B)	Squared Correlati on(R <sup>2</sup> )	p-value	Decision
H <sub>01</sub> : Competitive Aggressiveness → Customer satisfaction	0.562	0.316	0.000	H <sub>01</sub> was not supported
H <sub>02</sub> : Competitive Aggressiveness → Repeat Patronage	0.779	0.607	0.000	H <sub>02</sub> was not supported
H <sub>03</sub> : Competitive Aggressiveness	0.831	0.690	0.000	H <sub>03</sub> was

→Referrals					not supported
H <sub>04</sub> :Competitive Aggressiveness → Customer patronage	0.786	0.618	0.014		H <sub>04</sub> was not supported

**Table 1B. MODEL FIT RESULTS:**

ITEMS	GFI	NFI	CFI	RMR	CMIN/DF
<b>MODEL FIT RESULTS</b>	.968	.955	.976	0.024	2.79
<b>ACCEPTABLE LIMITS</b>	>0.90	>0.90	>0.95	<0.080	<3.0

**Decision**

The model fit indices above have confirmed the models as being fit enough in representing the relationship between the data and the hypothesized relationships. The results of the structural equation modeling carried out are as follows:

H<sub>01</sub> : (Competitive Aggressiveness → Customer Satisfaction) = ( **$\beta = 0.562$ ,  $R^2=31.6\%$ ;  $p=0.00<0.05$** )

H<sub>02</sub> : (Competitive Aggressiveness → Repeat Patronage) = ( **$\beta = 0.779$ ,  $R^2=60.7\%$ ;  $p=0.00<0.05$** )

H<sub>03</sub>: (Competitive Aggressiveness → Customer Referrals) = ( **$\beta = 0.831$ ,  $R^2=69.0\%$ ;  $p=0.00<0.05$** )

H<sub>04</sub>: (Competitive Aggressiveness → Customer Patronage (combined effect of the three measures) = ( **$\beta = 0.786$ ,  $R^2=61.8\%$ ;  $p=0.014<0.05$** )

These empirical results above do not support the Null hypotheses (H<sub>01</sub> – H<sub>04</sub>) which aver that competitive aggressiveness has no significant effect on the three dimensions of customer patronage. Rather the study concludes that competitive aggressiveness has positive and significant influence on customer patronage in terms of Customer Satisfaction, Repeat Patronage and Customer Referrals.

**DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS**

This study formulated and tested four hypotheses. In Hypothesis One (H<sub>01</sub>), the investigation focused on the impact of competitive aggressiveness on customer satisfaction within telecommunication firms, revealing a significant positive correlation between competitiveness and customer patronage in terms of customer satisfaction. This outcome aligns with the findings of Choi and Chu (2001), who similarly concluded that service quality is a primary determinant of guest satisfaction and repeat patronage in Hong Kong hotels.

Hypothesis Two (H<sub>02</sub>) demonstrated that competitive aggressiveness significantly and positively influences customers' repeat patronage. This finding is consistent with the findings of previous studies. Boulding et al. (1993) established a positive relationship between service quality and repurchase intention. Similarly, Ogwo and Igwe (2012) identified a positive and significant relationship between service quality and customer intention to use mobile phone services. Nsikan-Abasi and Dafiovo (2015) also concluded that Etisalat's integrated marketing communication strategies encouraged both initial and continuous purchases of its products and services. Nwinkinaka and Poi (2023) reached a similar conclusion, noting that customer care practices of telecommunication firms influence repeat purchases. This conclusion is

further supported by Chukundah (2023), who found that relationship marketing affects customer repeat visits and loyalty.

The results of Hypothesis Three (H03) indicated that the competitive aggressiveness of telecommunication firms significantly and positively influences customer referrals. This conclusion concurs with Boulding et al. (1993), who found a positive relationship between service quality and customers' willingness to recommend. In Hypothesis Four (H04), the study concluded that firms' competitive aggressiveness influences customer patronage. This conclusion is consistent with earlier studies. It aligns with the findings of Lee and Feick (2001) in South Korea and Gerpott et al. (2001) in Germany, which demonstrated that call rate, quality of core service, and clarity of voice positively impact customer patronage. Abioro and Okeowo (202) reached a similar conclusion, noting that the promotional mix employed by telecommunication firms positively affects customer patronage. Anucha (2019) also concluded that service differentiation positively impacts customer patronage in Nigeria's hospitality industry. The conclusions of this study are in agreement with Nkpurukwe et al. (2020), who found a positive and significant relationship between mobile marketing strategies and customer patronage.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study has investigated the impact of competitive aggressiveness on customer patronage within the telecommunications sector in Rivers State, Nigeria. The analysis yielded substantial evidence of a significant relationship between competitive aggressiveness and three primary measures of Customer Patronage: Customer Satisfaction, Referrals, and Repeat Patronage. The findings suggest that telecommunications firms employing aggressive strategies tend to have an enhanced customer patronage. These results highlight the importance of competitive aggressiveness in fostering customer loyalty and driving business growth in a highly competitive market environment.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. Telecommunications firms should invest in competitive pricing and promotions, as these are crucial in attracting new customers. Firms should consider offering promotional packages and discounts that are both appealing and accessible to a wider audience, particularly in a market where price sensitivity is high.
2. Telecommunications firms should also focus on service quality improvement by providing excellent customer service to maintain customer satisfaction and encourage repeat patronage.
3. Telecommunications companies should invest in training their staff to enhance service delivery, as well as utilize technology to streamline customer interactions, making them more efficient and pleasant.
4. There is also a need to implement referral programs to incentivize existing customers to refer new users. This can create a self-sustaining cycle of customer acquisition driven by positive word-of-mouth.

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