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Abstract- The hospitality industry has experience dramatic changes with the adoption of new technologies in its service delivery process. Improving customer experience is topmost priority when it comes to utilizing new technologies and methods to push a particular brand in market space. Offering superior service in the marketplace has a positive impact on the organization ability to attract and retain customers. Despite the significance of branding in enterprise sustainability, little is known about the antecedents of brand acceptance in a VUCA environment. The business environment in Africa is usually described as volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous. To survive such a terrain firms adopts several strategies and mechanism to stay afloat and further beat competitive. To examine how firms survive their battle of brand competition, the study investigated the role of perceived value, social ties and customer engagement in brand acceptance. Data is collect from hospitality firms in French West African Countries. The data acquires is analysis by conducting partial least square structural equation modeling analysis and t-test to examine the hypothesis. The outcome of the study suggests that customer engagement is the most influential factor if firms want their brands to be accepted by potential and current clients.

Keywords: *social ties, customer engagement, perceived value, hospitality industry, branding, brand acceptance.*

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Antecedent and Consequence of Brand Acceptability: The Case of Hospitality Industry

Emmanuel Oteng

Abstract- The hospitality industry has experience dramatic changes with the adoption of new technologies in its service delivery process. Improving customer experience is topmost priority when it comes to utilizing new technologies and methods to push a particular brand in market space. Offering superior service in the marketplace has a positive impact on the organization ability to attract and retain customers. Despite the significance of branding in enterprise sustainability, little is known about the antecedents of brand acceptance in a VUCA environment. The business environment in Africa is usually described as volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous. To survive such a terrain firms adopts several strategies and mechanism to stay afloat and further beat competitive. To examine how firms survive their battle of brand competition, the study investigated the role of perceived value, social ties and customer engagement in brand acceptance. Data is collect from hospitality firms in French West African Countries. The data acquires is analysis by conducting partial least square structural equation modeling analysis and t-test to examine the hypothesis. The outcome of the study suggests that customer engagement is the most influential factor if firms want their brands to be accepted by potential and current clients.

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I. Introduction

Globalization and advancement in technology have affected the functional activities of both manufacturing and service firms in past decades. Especially in the hospitality industry there is an ongoing battle for firms' that offers superior services of value to its clients. For instance in the aviation industry airline service quality in recent times has become an essential ingredient to gain customer loyalty, gain repetitive buyers and satisfy customer. Firms are of the view that when clients appreciate the quality of service offered there is a great probably it might translate into brand loyalty. Users align with services that provide maximum utility and value. The pressure form users for an improved value have push firms to formulate policies aid at gaining a view into the customer perception before product or service deployment starts. The ability to anticipate client perceive value have a significant impact on the brand image of firm(Park et al, 2004; Liou et al, 2015; Chen & Hu, 2013; Wu & Cheng, 2013; Wang et al, 2013).

Improving firm brand is an upmost priority for both managers and marketing researchers as can be seen from the number of studies on the subject. These studies focus on the diverse mode such as customer engagement, loyalty program and customer retention and strategies relating brand management. Brand management strategies include lock – in strategies, brand awareness strategies and brand performance evaluation matrix (e.g. Guesalaga, 2016; Higgins & Scholer, 2009; Frow & Knox, 2009; Brodie et al, 2013). Although firms invest enormously to boost its brand image there are circumstances that these activities does not achieve its target result.

Particularly researches in the domain of service marketing have focus on the role of social media, customer engagement and brand engagement and it determinants (e.g. Guesalaga, 206; Brodie et al, 2013; Luckmann, 2005; Davaliene et al, 2015). Therefore to researcher need to explore other factors that can boost brand acceptability of an enterprise. To survive in the competitive business environment in recent times requires a firm to have a brand that is accepted by both users and potential users. Therefore firms have implemented diverse strategies to boost its brand image and reputation. Attaining an acceptable brand is a collective effect between diverse actors with the organization ecosystem. In this study we treat firm, user and other agencies as actors with a wider industrial ecosystem in accordance with social network theory. To achieve organization target of gaining much brand recognition is a communal effort whereby is the duty of the firm to lease with all relevant actors in other to gain brand acceptance.

The central theme of the study it to investigate the role social ties, perceived value and customer engagement plays when it comes to firm brand acceptability. These factors are examined in the hospitality industry subsector in Francophone West Africa sub region. The rationale for selecting this study location is as a result of the surge in local and multinational hospitality firm over the years in these locations. Gaining access to information to address this question will enables firm to strategize in a data driven manner to boost it brand awareness and management activities. The remainder of the study is arranged as follows, section 2 focus on theoretical background and hypothesis of the study, section 3 presents the research methodology, section 4 discuses the empirical result and findings and lastly section 5 presents conclusion and further research direction.

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II. Theoretical Background and Hypothesis

Social ties evidently enable firms to build productive social network that enrich the information and knowledge sharing between firms and it consumers. These ties ensure firms accumulate improved social capital that is relevant to the sustainability of firm and its brand image. A firm's brand image happens to be its source of attraction for potential clients. Furthermore social ties aid in bridging the gap between firms and end user therefore aiding firms to gain access to rich pool of knowledge and insight about customer needs regarding value and quality. Company's ability to interact with its community has immersed benefit on it brand (Louro et al, 2001; Burt, 1992).

The existence of such ties leads to the formation of brand communities that has impact on the brand reputation of firms. Community members' are responsible for sharing information among member with the aid of boosting the value of their service. Through these interaction third party actor and sub group's springs up and this according to a study conducted by Heding et al (2000) has a positive impact on brand value creation and acceptability. Inferring from this study suggests that engaging community and other actors within the ecosystem of the industry enables firms to gear its brand strategy toward particular audiences. When this happens it enable firms are able to communicate well it core mandate, value and norms to its potential clients. On the other side since there is an interaction between firms and community, actors such as end users turns to gain insight into firms' product before it hits the market. Furthermore end user aids in the shaping of firms service product through feedback loop (Louro & Cunha, 2010; Hollebeek, 2011; Brodie et al, 2013; Porter et al, 2011).

Accepting the brand of a firm is a communal effort involving firm, customer and community as a whole. Therefore ensuring toes exist between these actors aside building up the social capital needs enable firms gain confident in a particular brand. Gaining confidence in specific brand most at times result in brand acceptance and brand loyalty. Furthermore the interaction between these agencies promotes brand equity because actors turn to gain some form of familiarity with particular brand (Aaker, 1991; Boyle, 2007). Based on the merit of social ties to diverse enterprises, the study argues that social ties have a propensity to affect brand image of a firm. We propose that the more embedded firms are with other actors within its ecosystem have the probability to affect the acceptance rate of its brand. From this perspective the hypothesis 1 is formulated.

H1: The existence of social ties between the various actors with organizations' has relationship with the acceptance of firm's brand.

The service dominant logic suggest that end-users or clients are not passive users but rather active ones therefore the need for firms to include firm in its service delivery process. Shifting from Good dominant logic to a service dominant logic is critical for value creation and co creation. Value creation is essential if enterprises can gain the attention of it targeted market. Creating value with customers requires continuous communication and interaction between entities and clients to enrich learning and knowledge creation process. During co value creation firms turns to share design and service deployment strategies including marketing strategy with it potential clients. It further enhances the social experience among these actors. The mutual exchanges between actors leads to the formation of mutual trust. Trust is critical if the objective of any alliance or organization can be attained both in the short or long run. One critical merit for co creation with clients is the fact that it leads to the provision of the expected value client demands (Vargo et al, 2004; Prahalad et al, 2004; Mulhern & Duffy, 2004; Keh & Lee, 2006).

The perception of clients about a firm's value affects its brand image over a period of time. For instance if customers perceive firms' service a substandard it turns to affect how the individual thinks of the brand of such entity. Firms with quality services that satisfy the perception of users regarding value translates into service addiction and therefore product loyalty. The more loyal an individual is to a particular product or service it influences its sense of loyalty to such brands. Therefore for firms to achieve a loyal market pool is critical to offer services that meets the perceive value of clients making it easy to convert them to both repetitive buyers and also brand loyalist. Customer's attachment to a particular brand leads to customer satisfaction and retention. It is argued that when customers are loyal to a particular brand it turns to be less sensitive towards price. When users are less sensitive to price it reduces firms' marketing expenditure since firms does not need to invest much to promote and advertise its services. The reduction in reoccurring expenditure enables firms to invest in other functional aspects of the enterprise. The ability of firms to anticipate customer perception relating to its service value it has the probability to affect the acceptance of its brand. Furthermore it enables firms to satisfy its customers (Buttle, 2006; Kotler, 2000; Bowen & Chen, 2001; Iqbah, 2011; Prentice & King, 2011). The hypothesis 2 is formulated to examine the relationship between when firms' perceive as valuable services and its impact on brand acceptability.

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H2: When firms are able to anticipate the anticipated value of it customers it has the propensity to affect enterprise brand acceptability.

The growing changes in the business environment have resulted in fierce competition among firms in recent times. Globalization and rapid increase in technology have affected the nature in which business functional activities are carried out. To survive in this competitive environment firms needs to adopt and implement prudent strategies that outwit its competitors in particular industry. One critical strategy enterprises have adopted to stay ahead of competition especially in service industry is to engage customers from the initial stage to after sale service stage. Engaging users enables firms to gain insight into the mind of individuals enabling the provision of value added service. Furthermore, it aids firms to gain attention into the preference, purchasing and consumer decision-making. Frequent communication between potential clients and enterprises it boost customer experience. When customer gains experience about a service it serves as a base for future decision-making regarding service design and deployment (Wilson et al, 2011; Michchaelidou et al, 2011; Kumer & Mirchandani, 2012).

To engage customer firms adopts various strategies such as social media campaigns and interactive sessions. The adoption of this customer engagement strategy is fueled by the rapid increase in usage of social media platforms. Social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and others over the yeas have gained an increase in patronage therefore making it a powerful communication tool for service delivery providers. It enable enterprises interact in real time with its clients through its own social media modes. The deployment of these social tools comparatively an effective medium to interact with clients in a digital age. Researches over the decade have shown that there is a casual relationship between firm engagement through social media and an influence in users preference and buying decisions. The findings from these studies have shaped the marketing strategy of most firms. Firm over the years have rearrange their functional blocks to align it with evolving trends in social media and information technology. Aside ended user it promotes business – business interactions, one of the essential building blocks for the success of any industry sector is inter-firm relationship. These interactions between firms increase the efficiency of buyer – seller relationship (Nielson Company, 2012; Kietzmann et al, 2011; Christ & Anderson, 2011; Marshall et al, 2012).

Enterprises that are able to take advantage of modern and proactive tools to gain insight into the minds of its users are competitive comparatively. From this perspective the study examines whether customer engagement have an influence choice and acceptance of a particular brand aside influencing purchasing and preference of customers. Hypothesis 3 investigates the relationship between customer engagement and organizational brand acceptability.

H3: End – user and firm interaction influences client's acceptability of a particular organizational brand.

III. Research Design and Methodology

a) Methods and Analysis Tool

To investigate the impact of social ties, perceived value and consumer engagement on the acceptance of firms brand, the study employs the usage of quantitative methods. The adoption of this approach enables the researcher to examine the empirical or casual relationship between the diverse various understudy. Partial least square structural equation modeling is used. The choice of structural equation modeling is to enable the researcher examine the latent variables at play in a robust manner (Yin, 2000; Hair et al., 2013; Salkind, 2012).

The data acquired for the purpose of this study is analyzed using Smart PLS version 12 statistical software. In addition SPSS statistical software version 22 is used to examine the reliability of data using the cronbach alpha value as the unit of measurement.

b) Data Collection

The data for this study is collect from diverse hospitality firms at the firm level. Hospitality firms in West African Francophone countries are considered as the population for this study. Within this population, random sampling approach is use to select and collect data from these entities. The entities selected for this study is selected in accordance with the objective that seeks to investigate the impact of social ties, perceived value and consumer engagement on brand acceptance. In examining this phenomenon, data is collected from various enterprises within the hospitality industry in some selected West African Francophone countries, The country selected includes Ivory Coast, Guinea, Togo and Benin. The rationale for selecting this location is based on a 3- dimension criterion such as political stability, number of firms within the hospitality industry and economic stability.

Adopting a firm level approach to data collection, initial contacts were made with potential entities through email. Yellow pages and industrial booklets served as the source for contact information. Initially electronic mails are sent to a total of one hundred and fifty (150) firms in these countries. After a period of two (2) weeks the researcher received feedback from ninety-three (93) firms. Resulting in a non-responses rate of 38 percent (38%). The remaining 62 percent of the firms granted the researcher the mandate to respond to the researcher questions by provided relevant information needed to address the objective of this study.

Questionnaire is used as the data collection instrument for this study. The items on the questionnaire

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are measured on a 7-liket scale. The questionnaire is first drafted in English and later translated into French in order to communicated well with our targeted sample. It is design taking critical note of how concise and precise it should be in order to avoid ambiguities that might distort the information gathering process. To confirm the non-ambiguity of questionnaire, pilot implementation is conducted. After the pilot stage, comments and feedback are considered and integrated into the revision process. Questionnaires are revised and later distributed to respondents within the selected firms. Key informant approach is adopted to enable the researcher gain relevant insight from key personnel in the various firms. The data is collected within a period of one month. During this period respond rate of 85 percent is attain representing 79 firms. The data collected is stored in Microsoft Excel version 2007.

IV. Empirical Result, Analyses and Discussion

a) Profile of Respondent

This section presents the profile of the respondents that responded to our questionnaire during the field survey. Considering the demography the details covered included respondent gender, education background, geographical location of firm and the type of firm. The profile can be seen in table 4.1 and 4.2. It can be seen from the table 4.1 and 4.2 that the respondents selected for this study comes from diverse firms with the industrial sub sector, therefore enabling the researcher gain much insight into the happening in that sector. Firm's level data is gain from enterprises in various sectors such as hoteling, transportation, cruise line, catering services and event planning firm. Gaining insights from key informants within this sectors of the industry enables researcher examine the extent social ties, perceived value and consumer engagement and firms brand acceptance. Service user arguably are not passive users but rather active ones therefore the urgency to understand what factors underpins the acceptance of certain brand to enable management make proactive decision about product design, deployment, advertisement and promotion. When these activities are conducted in a prudent manner it enables firm experience an increase in market share and positive returns on investment. From the data collected regarding gender of respondents male comprises of 62 percent and female had 38 percent respectively. Furthermore the firms are distributed as 42 percent, 28 percent, 12 percent and 18 percent respectively at the four locations, thus Ivory Coast, Guinea, Togo and Benin selected for the study.

Table 4.1: Demographic of Respondent

Education Background		
PhD		2
Masters Degree		16
Bachelors Degree		86
ProfessionalCertification		44

Table 4.2: Types of Firms

Sector	No.of Respondents
Lodging firm	28
Transportation Service	15
Cruise Line	2
Catering Services	25
Event Planning	9

b) Reliability and Validity Test

The reliability of data is critical if meaningful inferences can be made from it. In addition to perform further empirical analysis is critical to text the reliability of data. To test the reliability of the data acquired through the field survey cronbach alpha value and composite reliability test is conducted respectively. The alpha value obtained for this data is 0.86 indicating the credibility of the data acquired. To buttress this point it can be seen from table 4.3 that all variables have high composite reliability value. A composite reliability value of 0.5 or higher is accepted as a positive step for further analysis (Hulland & Ivey, 1999). The result obtained from the test indicates that all the variables examined have a higher value. Suggesting that the data is reliable for further empirical analysis.

Furthermore the validity of the data is examined using the discriminant validity approach proposed by Fornell and Larcker (1981). The outcome the results show that the data is valid and therefore proper for further analysis.

Table 4.3: Results for Composite Reliability Test

Variables	Value
Social Ties	0.898
Perceived Value	0.827
Consumer Engagement	0.823
Brand Acceptability/Success	0.809

c) Collinearlty Test

To examine the collinearity of the data acquired, the variance inflation factor is adopted as our measuring unit. From the table 4.4 it can be seen that all the indicators measured have a variance inflation factor value of less than 10 suggesting colinearity is not a major issue with this data. All these test include the reliability and validity test couple with the collinearity test support that fact that the data gathered is empirical reliable and valid for further analysis.

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Table 4.4: Result for collinearity Test

Variables	VIF Value
STI1	1.234
STI2	3.458
STI3	3.557
STI4	5.345
PVAL1	1.345
PVAL2	1.253
PVAL3	2.678
PVAL4	6.010
CENG1	2.547
CENG2	2.879
CENG3	1.098
CENG4	2.567
BRAND1	3.679
BRAND2	0.354

d) Descriptive Statistics

The descriptive statistics of the variables examined for this study is elaborated in this section. These include the sample size, mean and standard deviation. The data had no missing values. Table 4.5 presents the result for the descriptive statistical test.

Table 4.5: Descriptive Statistics

Variables	N	Mean	S.D
STI1	79	5.076	1.234
STI2	79	4.924	3.458
STI3	79	4.608	3.557
STI4	79	4.608	5.345
PVAL1	79	4.684	1.345
PVAL2	79	5.291	1.253
PVAL3	79	5.329	2.678
PVAL4	79	5.532	6.010
CENG1	79	5.190	2.547
CENG2	79	5.063	2.879
CENG3	79	5.000	1.098
CENG4	79	5.415	2.567
BRAND1	79	5.582	3.679
BRAND2	79	4.975	0.354

e) Correlation Test

From the correlation test it can be seen that all the latent variables to some extent had some empirical relationship with the firm's brand acceptability. The result further indicated that consumer engagement is the most critical factor if firms needs their diverse brand to be acceptable to it market target. Involving end user enables firms to shape the cognitive and behavioral perception of individuals towards the brands of these firms. The findings in addition contribute to studies in service marking research (for instance Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004; Tsai & Men, 2013) that advocates that firm's ability to engage user aid co-creation and further enhance the value of service offered. Furthermore when firms interact with its end user it enable firms to cut down waste, risk and gain an increase in it market share over time. The correlation result of the constructs is presented in table 4.6.

Table 4.6: Results for Correlation Test

Variables	1	2	3	4
Brand Acceptability				
Social Ties	0.742			
Perceived Value	0.379	0.595		
ConsumerEngagement	0.500	0.629	0.501	

f) Path Estimation and Discussion

To investigate how social ties, perceived value of brand and consumer engagement impacts firm's brand acceptability in the West Africa Francophone hospitality industry, the study employed the usage of partial least square structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) technique. The rationale for selecting PLS-SEM originate from the fact that this approach is much suitable when there is relatively small sample size and limited literature in the subject matter. Inference from the number of studies on this domain buttress the point that there exist limited research especially how these variables interacts in a developing economy.

From the path estimation is can be seen that consumer engagement has significant regression coefficient with brand acceptability in these countries. Indicating that firms that makes an effort to engage its consumers in their service design and delivery process are able to capture the heart of these individuals. For a firm's brand to be accepted it needs to be user-centric in nature therefore giving customers the sense of belongingness to associate with such brands and firms. Therefore for firm's brand to be acceptable is prudent for firm to integrate clients as a central part of its service design and deployment strategy. Making customers part of ones corporate marketing and functional strategy enables firms gains critical insights into client minds to aid in product or service improvement to meet anticipated value and quality. From the path estimation result in figure 4.1 is seen that consumer engagement has the highest coefficient of 0.760, indicating it contributes immensely towards the acceptability of firms brand. The findings contributes to studies that suggest that firm turns to increase it value creation, market share and profits when is able to engage clients (e.g Tsai & Men, 2013). Furthermore it contributes to researchers understanding of the role customer engagement plays in accepting a particular brand of a firm.

Furthermore the perceived value of a firm's brand does not have a significant impact on the acceptability of a firm's brand. What firms perceive as valuable service or product does not contribute towards it acceptance by client base. This is attributed to the fact that both firms and client have different perception regarding quality and value therefore affecting the judgment call of these enterprises. In order to gain insights into what client perceive as valuable is critical to involve end user from the design to deployment state in accordance with the concept of open innovation. Open innovation as propose by Chesborough (2003)

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advocates that firm needs to utilize external resources to boost it internal innovation activities. One of the critical resources for the success of a service product is its customers therefore is wise to interact with them from initial stage till commercialization. It enables firm product services that are valued by client. To achieve this feat is critical for firms to adopt a more user-friendly approach to interacting with its potential clients and community as a whole. These interactions enables the entity gain access to large social capital base that is relevant for the offering of valuable services to diverse population or market targets. Adopting a more open approach will open up firm to attract more information and data to enrich it value creation process.

Social ties in most studies have been argues to provide firms with enough social capital to enrich competitive advantage and internal capabilities. Further is touted to bridge gap between producers and final consumers as a result of formation of social networks (Borgatti, 2012, Burt, 1992). Despite the benefits of social ties to firm, it can be seen from the findings that ties with member within and outside a particular industrial subsector does not impact the brand acceptability rate of firms. Studies in social network shows that when individuals have social ties it enables information and knowledge sharing and further build mutual trust. Mutual trust is critical for the enhancement of firm reputation and image (Bordeux, 1986). Findings from this study contradict this social network principle of social ties. Factors such as the dynamism and intangibility of service products requires customers to experience in order to either accept or reject a particular service. Therefore have social ties with an individual without experiencing your service can not necessary translates into brand loyalty or acceptance of brand. Therefore for firms to improve it brand loyalty and acceptance through social ties is critical for it to adopt strategies that transform these ties into active users of its services.

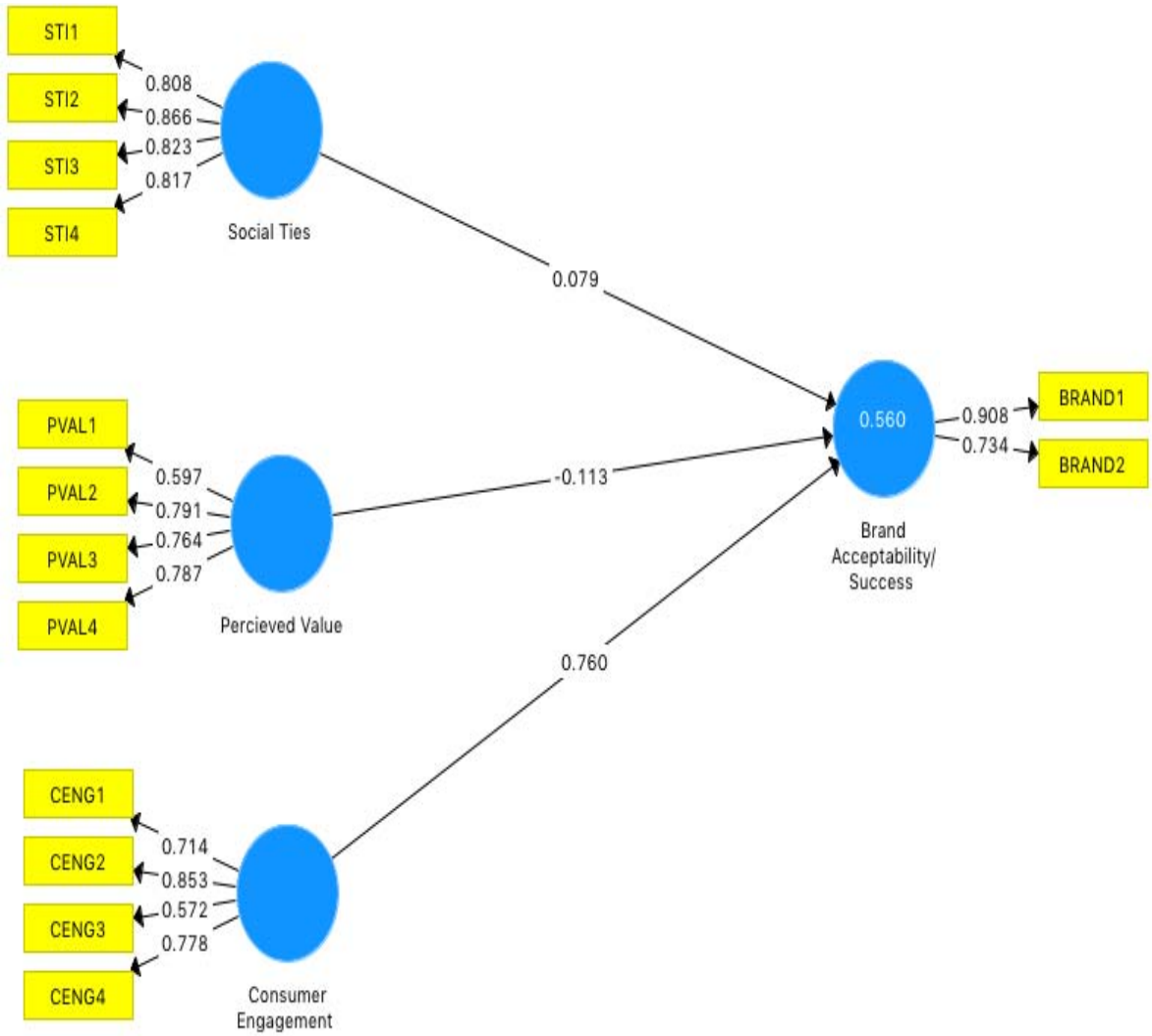

Figure 4.1: Path Estimation Result

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g) Hypothesis Testing

To accept or reject a hypothesis it need to have a t-value of more than 1.96. According to the findings of the hypotheses test it shows that only one of the hypotheses can be accepted. Indicating that consumer engagement is the most significant constructs that aids firm brand acceptance in these countries. The table 4.7 shows the rest for the hypotheses test.

Table 4.7: Results for Hypotheses testing

Consumer Engagement → Brand Acceptability	8.270
Perceived Value → Brand Acceptability	0.921
Social Ties → Brand Acceptability	0.618

V. Conclusion and Further Research

The study investigates the impact of social ties, perceived value, customer engagement and its impact on the brand acceptability of firm. To ascertain the extent at which these variables affect the brand of firms, the study adopted a quantitative approach where partial least square structural equation modeling is used. Data is collected from 79 firms spanning across 4 different francophone countries in the West African sub region. Initially reliability and validity is test to provide the grounds for further analysis. The result of these two tests proves that the data is valid and accurate for further empirical analysis.

The findings of the study contributed towards studies in consumer engagement whilst contradicting some social network principles as elaborated in earlier sections. Although it make immerse contributing towards the area of service marketing and branding there are some limitation to the study. Foremost the sample size is relatively small comparing to the geographical location of the sub region. Furthermore due to the rapid changes in the socio-economic determinants in these countries requires a longitudinal study. A longitudinal approach will enable researcher to understand how these factor changes over the time period.

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