

Attitude and Practices of Small and Medium Scale Enterprises (SMEs) Owners towards Apprenticeship in Major Markets in Anambra State, Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

This investigation ascertained the reason for the recent preference of salesgirls over apprentice by Igbo small and medium business owners in Anambra State, Nigeria. The study investigated 1330 small and medium business owners in two major markets in Onitsha and Nnewi, Anambra State, through descriptive survey research. Mean statistics were used as a yardstick and a threshold of 3.00 as the acceptance region and less than 3 as rejection region. Findings revealed numerous reasons for preference of salesgirls over apprentice by owners of small/medium scale businesses in some major markets in Onitsha and Nnewi, Anambra State. Among the reasons are that; salesgirls attract more customers than an apprentice, apprentice lures their customers after setting them up in business, that salesgirls are less corrupt than apprentice etc. The study recommended that the engagement of more apprentices than salesgirls should be encouraged. The implications of the findings among others show that Igbo businesses will not outlive more than two decades and pervasiveness of their businesses will start shrinking shortly.

KEYWORDS: Apprenticeship scheme, Small and Medium Scale Business Enterprises, Salesgirls and Anambra State

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INTRODUCTION

In recent times, the Igbo apprenticeship model has garnered worldwide commendation. This is perhaps why Neuwirth (2008) said that Igbo apprenticeship system is the largest incubator of business platforms in the world over, because when an apprentice serves his master, the master (business owner) is expected to set up the apprentice in business. This apprenticeship system has been adjudged the world over as one of the best ways to establishing businesses and entrepreneurs. To give credence to the above statement, Paul, Laura and Bohannam (1968) (cited in Onwuzuluigbo, 2012) note that "no Nigerian market could be fully effective without Igbo contingent". They cited an example of a situation in which TW market operators in Abuja Nigeria initially insisted that they do not want Igbo traders in their market, contrary to the advice of the more experienced traders, when the market failed to flourish, they allowed the Igbo traders to fully participate in their markets which made the market to blossom and prosper.

The Southeastern people of Nigeria have succeeded in spreading across Nigeria and other African countries with their businesses. There is a popular saying in Nigeria that any place in the country you do not find an Igbo man, then

that place has an economic problem. The reason for this is not far-fetched, Igbo apprenticeship system and their entrepreneurial skills is the answer. Igbo people have been very creative in the areas of buying and selling and that is why they seem to dominate in all the major markets in Nigeria. This is notwithstanding the fact that they incurred monumental economic loss during the Nigerian-Biafra civil war, and it was through apprenticeship, trade and commerce that the Igbo economy was resuscitated. The people have always relied on self-help and self enterprise in their business endeavours. This is believed to be as a result of victim mentality created by the losses they suffered during the civil war (Nworah, 2011). "Imu-afia" or "igba boyi" (learning a trade/vocation) has always been the tradition of Igbo people of Eastern Nigeria. They believe that a man must take proper care of his nuclear and extended families and that the best way to achieving this feat was engaging in micro, small-medium businesses, mostly aided by apprenticeship.

In apprenticeship, Igbo people became outstanding among their contemporaries in pursuing opportunities to become active economic individuals, despite the meagre resources

within their control immediately after the war. It is also evident that Igbo people have laid a solid foundation of business culture through the apprenticeship system of mentoring their young ones and relatives. This practice has made it possible for them to introduce their friends, loved ones, kinsmen etc to the same lines of business. According to Kanu (2019)

"once an apprentice graduates and is settled, he has a responsibility of doing for others back at home what his master has done for him. He, therefore, goes to the village and picks another apprentice who would serve him. It is a model that was developed for the sustenance of Igbo business training of young ones who were unable to go to secondary or higher education, instead of roaming the streets". Based on this, some states or towns in Igbo land are known to be dominating in certain areas of businesses".

This trend is however fast phasing out and it is not to the advantage of Igbo nation, which is known for its vastness in business. These days, Igbo traders seem to have resorted to the employment of salesgirls as against apprenticeship. This seems to be affecting the business creation and sustainability of businesses in the area. A situation which may be catastrophic, as many youths are without gainful employment in the region. A trend which if continued may pose security threats in the future as a result of massive youth unemployment. It is against this background that this paper aims to ascertain the reason for the preference of salesgirls over apprenticeship by Igbo business owners.

CONCEPTUAL REVIEW

Apprenticeship within the context of the study

The Igbo apprenticeship scheme popularly regarded as "Igbo boyi" (serving a master) is an Igbo entrepreneurial induction strategy whereby young Igbo boys are inducted by a business/vocation mentor (oga/madam) into a particular entrepreneurial venture (Chinwuba & Ezeugwu, 2017). It is an economic empowerment scheme whereby a young boy is adopted by a mentor for a period of between 5-8 years. The mentee (nwa boyi), during this period of economic adoption, is expected to serve the mentor religiously, and the mentor in return takes full responsibility of the mentee.

According to Chrisent (2019) as cited in Kanu (2019) opined that

the Igbo apprenticeship system is an unpaid business apprenticeship/incubator model that lets people learn business from a master for a certain number of years (5-8) depending and at the end of their apprenticeship tenure, gets cash infusion and support to start their own business. There is no salary paid during the time of the apprenticeship tenure but accommodation, meals, clothing and t-fare are provided for by the master. When the years of learning are over, the boy is as good as his master.

What the apprentice is taught during the periods of his apprenticeship is not just how to buy and sell, business network, business connections creation, business exposure are also part and parcel of Igbo apprenticeship scheme. On graduation, apprentice having satisfactorily served his master, the master performs the "settlement" (setting him up in business), this comes with huge cash, (depending on the type of business) renting of a shop for him etc. Some

masters at times decide going into partnership with the apprentice.

Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises

The World Bank Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises Development Group breakdown MSMEs according to the following parameters;

- A. Micro enterprises – up to 10 employees, total assets worth up to \$100,000 and total sales of up to \$100,000.
- B. Small enterprises – up to 50 employees, total assets worth up to \$3million and total sales of up to \$3million.
- C. Medium enterprises – up to 300 employees, total assets worth up to \$15million and total sales up to \$15million.

In Britain, the USA and Canada, small-scale business is defined as the industry with an annual turnover of 2million pounds or less with fewer than 200 paid employees. In Japan, the small-scale industry is defined according to the type of industry, paid-up capital and number of employees. Small and medium enterprises are defined as those in manufacturing with 100 million yen paid-up capital and 100 employees and those in the retail and services trade with 10 million yen paid-up capital and 50 employees.

In Nigeria, there is no separate definition of small and medium scale enterprise. Nnanna (2003) and Salako (2004) as cited in Nwokoye (2012) acknowledged SMEs as the bedrock of industrial development of any country. Apart from numerous commodities produced by SMEs, they provide veritable means of large scale employment. According to Oyeyinka (2020), small and medium scale enterprise is defined as businesses with a turnover of less than ₦100m per annum and or less than 300 employees.

RESEARCH METHODS

The study adopts a descriptive survey research design. The areas of the study are Onitsha main market and Nkwo Nnewi market (spare parts dealers) all in Anambra State, Nigeria. The choice of Onitsha and Nnewi is informed by the large number of small/medium businesses situated in these commercial cities. Onitsha main market is alleged to be the largest market in the whole of West Africa, while Nkwo Market Nnewi is regarded as the "Japan of Africa" and the domain of the second-largest market in Anambra State, Nigeria. The population of the study is 1500 business owners. The instrument for data collection is a structured questionnaire that is validated using face and content technique. A total of 1500 copies of questionnaire were randomly distributed and 1330 were correctly filled and returned. Data collected were analyzed using descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages and mean).

Table 1 as seen in Appendix 1 shows the distribution of responses for the preference of salesgirls over apprentice by Igbo business owners in Nigeria. When the business owners were asked through the questionnaire if salesgirls attract more customers than an apprentice, out of the 1330 respondents, 680 strongly agreed, 440 agreed, 100 were undecided, 60 disagreed while 50 strongly disagreed. Out of the 1330 respondents, 700 strongly agreed that salesgirls are less corrupt and more sincere than apprentices, 260 agreed, 120 were undecided, 90 disagreed while 160 strongly disagreed. When it was enquired from the business owner respondents if salesgirls are easily remunerated and their wages are not a burden on them, 37.6% of the

respondents strongly agreed, 39.1% agree, 5.3% were undecided, 13.5% disagreed while 4.5% strongly disagreed. As for whether the respondents think that apprentices usually lure their master's customers after setting up their businesses, 36.1% of the respondents strongly agreed, 42.9% agreed, 11.3% were undecided, 6% disagreed while 3.8% strongly disagreed. Majority of the respondents (31.2%) are of the opinion that salesgirls are more obedient than an apprentice, while 16.5% agreed to the statement, 25.9% of respondents were undecided, 17.2% disagreed to the statement, very of the respondent 9.2% strongly disagreed. Coming to if salesgirls have assisted the respondents significantly in getting and maintaining supplies, 312 (23.5%) respondents out of 1330 agreed strongly, 550 respondents agreed, 210 were indifferent, 201(15.1%) disagreed and a diminutive number of 57 (4.5%) of the respondents strongly disagreed. 9.5% of the respondents strongly agreed that salesgirls had provided their business with access to new information, 8.9% agreed to this assertion, 31.8% are yet to decide, 31.2% disagreed and 18.6% firmly disagreed.

On the issue of who is more enlightened between the salesgirls and apprentices, 389 out of 1330 respondents agreed strongly that salesgirls are more enlightened than the apprentice, 313 concurred, 340 were neutral, 136 do not believe the statement and 152 respondents strongly disagreed. When the business owners were also faced with the question whether salesgirls treat customers with care, 200 (15.0% respondents strongly agreed), 395 (29.7%) agreed, 244 (18.3%) were undecided, 216 (16.2%) just disagreed and 275 (20.7%) strongly disagreed. On whether salesgirls have contributed significantly to the financing of respondents' businesses, 14.9% of the respondents strongly agreed, 8.6% just agreed, 24.0% were neutral, while 31.1% disagreed and 21.4% strongly disagreed. Another strong question was also put up to know if salesgirls are not associated with criminal acts, a greater number (417) of the respondents out of 1330 strongly agreed, 378 agreed, 243 were indifferent, 201 disagreed and 91(6.8%) strongly disagreed. 38.3% which is about 508 respondents strongly agreed that salesgirls do not keep bad companies, 24.6% agreed to the statement, 16.4% were yet to decide, 8.8% said no to the tenets of the question and 12.0% strongly disagreed. That salesgirls are not usually disturbed by their family members and friends to send their masters money home is strongly believed by 29.0% of the respondents, while greater majority of 31.7% agreed to the statement, 16.0% were undecided, 14.6% disagreed and 8.7% strongly disagreed. On whether salesgirls do not have secret/personal shops other than that of their masters, 123 respondents out of 1330 strongly agreed, 276 respondents agreed, 498 are yet to say anything, 301 disagreed and 132 of the business owners strongly disagreed. The last question put to the respondents was that, salesgirls are not under any agreement with the master to set her up in business, that she will be disengaged when found wanting, 522 (39.2%) respondents strongly agreed, 316 (23.8%) agreed, 194 (14.6%) were undecided, 216 (16.2%) disagreed and 82 (6.2%) of respondents strongly disagreed.

Summary of the Findings

Judging cumulatively using mean statistics as a yardstick and a threshold of 3.00 as the acceptance region and less than 3.00 as rejection region, on the whole, with a mean of 4.23,

the respondents accepted the fact that salesgirls attract more customers than the apprentice. They also concurred to the assertion that salesgirls are less corrupt and more sincere than apprentices with a mean of 3.94. Similarly, a mean of 3.92 shows that the respondents were in the affirmative that salesgirls are easily remunerated, and their remuneration is never a burden on their masters unlike setting up an apprentice in business. In the same line of thought, the respondents agreed that apprentice usually lures their master's customer after setting up their own business with a mean of 4.02 which is greater than the benchmark of acceptance which is 3.00. They also affirmed that salesgirls are more obedient than apprentice with a mean of 3.43. In that same vein, the respondents accepted that salesgirls had assisted them significantly in getting and maintaining supplies with a mean of 3.65. Based on the acceptance region of 3.00 and with a mean of 2.60 the respondents rejected that salesgirls have provided their businesses with access to new information. In another twist, they also rejected that salesgirls are more enlightened than apprentices with a mean of 2.98. That salesgirls treat customers with care more than the apprentices is not debatable by the respondents, it has a mean of 3.02. That salesgirl had contributed significantly in financing their businesses is what the respondents rejected it in its entirety, the mean of 2.64 is below the benchmark acceptance of 3.00. With a mean of 3.62, the respondents accepted that salesgirls are not usually associated with criminal acts.

Moving further, the researcher also discovered with mean of 3.68 that respondents accepted that salesgirls do not keep bad companies. A mean of 3.58 suggested that salesgirls are not usually disturbed by their relatives and friends to send their master's money home. The respondents rejected the assertion with a mean of 2.97 that salesgirls do not operate/own secret/personal shops other than that of their master. Finally, a mean of 3.74 shows that the respondents were in the affirmative that salesgirls are not under any agreement with their master to set them up in business, that salesgirls are disengaged when found wanton.

Conclusion

This study has succeeded in bringing to the public glare the reasons why the majority of businessmen in recent times prefer the engagement of salesgirls over the traditional engagement of apprentices in the southeast region of Nigeria. On the strength of the findings, the reasons given for preferring salesgirls to apprentices may be good, but for the greater good of the society and the region at large, the business owners may have to reconsider as the act of employing salesgirls may endanger the youths and create massive unemployment in the region. This is because the region is known for its entrepreneurial prowess and without apprenticeship in the region, a massive lacuna will be created in the pervasiveness and creation of new businesses in the area.

Recommendations/Implications of the Findings

Having seen the reasons for preference of salesgirls over apprentice by the Igbo business owners, the researcher recommends that:

- A. The engagement of more apprentices than salesgirls should be encouraged and look for a way to mitigate against its shortcoming.

- B. Government should organize training/workshops for business owners in the region about how critical it is to continue and sustain the apprenticeship system of business mentoring in the area.
- C. The government could also go further by providing stimulus packages for business owners that successfully trains and settles an apprentice within a certain period as a way of encouragement.

The implication of the findings of this study is that the pervasiveness of Igbo businesses will be threatened if the apprentice system in the area is not encouraged and stimulated by the government in the region. The act of engaging more salesgirls will lead to robbery, kidnapping and unemployment in the Igbo nation. The apprenticeship system has a snowballing effect in business creation because an apprentice settled will take up another apprentice to train and settle at the appropriate time and this will make Igbo businesses pervasive throughout the region and beyond.

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APPENDIX 1

Table1: Distribution of responses and Descriptive Statistics

S/N	Questionnaire Items	SA (5)	A (4)	UD (3)	D (2)	SD (1)	Mean
1.	Salesgirls attract more customers than an apprentices.	680 (51.1%)	440 (33.1%)	100 (%)	60 (7.5%)	50 (3.8%)	4.23
2.	Salesgirls are less corrupt and more sincere than apprentices.	700 (52.6%)	260 (19.5%)	120 (9%)	90 (6.8%)	160 (12%)	3.94
3.	Salesgirls are easily paid and not a big burden on business owners.	500 (37.6%)	520 (39.1%)	70 (5.3%)	108 (13.5%)	60 (4.5%)	3.92
4.	Salesgirls do not lure their master's customers after setting up their businesses.	480 (36.1%)	570 (42.9%)	150 (11.3%)	80 (6%)	50 (3.8%)	4.02
5.	Salesgirls are more obedient than apprentices.	415 (31.2%)	219 (16.5%)	345 (25.9%)	229 (17.2%)	122 (9.2%)	3.43
6.	Salesgirls have assisted me significantly in setting and maintaining supplies.	312 (23.5%)	550 (41.4%)	210 (15.8%)	201 (15.1%)	57 (4.3%)	3.65
7.	Salesgirls have provided my business with access to new information.	127 (9.5%)	118 (8.9%)	423 (31.8%)	415 (31.2%)	247 (18.6%)	2.60
8.	Salesgirls are more enlightened than apprentices.	389 (29.2%)	313 (23.5%)	340 (25.6%)	136 (10.2%)	152 (11.4%)	2.98
9.	Salesgirls treat customers with care more than apprentices.	200 (15.0%)	395 (29.7%)	244 (18.3%)	216 (16.2%)	275 (20.7%)	3.02

10.	Salesgirls have contributed significantly to my business financing.	198 (14.9%)	114 (8.6%)	319 (24.0%)	414 (31.1%)	285 (21.4%)	2.64
11.	Salesgirls are not usually associated with criminal acts.	417 (31.4%)	378 (28.4%)	243 (18.3%)	201 (15.1%)	91 (6.8%)	3.62
12.	Salesgirls do not keep bad companies.	509 (38.3%)	327 (24.6%)	218 (16.4%)	117 (8.8%)	159 (12.0%)	3.68
13.	Salesgirls are not usually disturbed by their family members and friends to send their masters money home.	386 (29.0%)	421 (31.7%)	213 (16.0%)	194 (14.6%)	116 (8.7%)	3.58
14.	Salesgirls do not own secret/personal shops other than that of their masters.	123 (9.2%)	276 (20.8%)	498 (37.4%)	301 (22.6%)	132 (9.9%)	2.97
15.	Salesgirls are not under any agreement with the master to set them up in business, she is disengaged when found wanton.	522 (39.2%)	316 (23.8%)	194 (14.6%)	216 (16.2%)	82 (6.2%)	3.74

Source: Field survey, 2020

