

# Smartphone Trial-ability and Customer Trust in South-South, Nigeria

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## Abstract

The study examines how the opportunity to test smartphones before buying affects consumer confidence in Nigeria's South-South region. Building upon Rogers' theory on how innovations spread and established principles of consumer confidence, this interview-based research examines whether hands-on product trials shape purchasing decisions and brand reliability perceptions. The investigation centers on five leading smartphone manufacturers that dominated the Nigerian market in 2022: Samsung, Apple, Xiome, Oppo, and Vivo. By conducting detailed conversations with consumers and analyzing recurring themes in their responses, the study uncovers key elements that drive smartphone purchasing in developing economies and offers practical guidance for companies and sellers looking to strengthen their market position

## Introduction

The smartphone market in Nigeria has experienced exponential growth, with the South-South region emerging as a significant consumer base. Nigeria represents one of Africa's largest smartphone markets, with penetration rates expected to reach 66% by 2025. The South-South zone, comprising Bayelsa, Rivers, Delta, Edo, Akwa Ibom, and Cross River states, presents unique consumer dynamics influenced by economic activities in the oil and gas sector, port operations, and increasing digital adoption.

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Trialability, defined as the degree to which an innovation can be experimented with on a limited basis before full adoption, represents a critical factor in technology acceptance. In the Nigerian context (Oladejo & Akanbi, 2021; & Wang, *et al.*, 2024), where counterfeit products proliferate and consumer protection mechanisms remain weak, the ability to trial smartphones becomes paramount in building trust (Adewale, 2019; & Oyewole, *et al.*, 2020). This study investigates how trial-ability influences customer trust and subsequent purchase decisions among South-South consumers.

## **Literature Review and Identified Gaps**

### **Theoretical Framework**

**Rogers' Diffusion of Innovation Theory** identifies five attributes that influence innovation adoption: relative advantage, compatibility, complexity, trial-ability, and observability (Eshiett & Eshiett, 2025; & Mehra, *et al.*, 2021). Trial-ability specifically refers to the ability of potential adopters to experiment with an innovation on a limited basis, reducing perceived risk and uncertainty (Rogers, 2003). Research demonstrates that innovations with higher trial-ability rates experience faster adoption rates (Claudy, *et al.*, 2015; & Eshiett & Eshiett, 2025).

**Customer Trust in Technology Adoption** has been extensively studied in e-commerce contexts, with findings indicating that trust significantly mediates the relationship between perceived usefulness, perceived risk, and adoption intention (Adewale, 2019;). Trust serves as a primary barrier to consumers' full adoption of technology, particularly in contexts characterized by weak institutional frameworks, high fraud rates, and privacy encroachment (Eshiett & Eshiett, 2024, & Martin & Murphy, 2020).

### **Smartphone Adoption Literature**

Studies on smartphone adoption have predominantly employed quantitative methodologies focusing on Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) and Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT) frameworks. Research on smartphone brand loyalty indicates that brand satisfaction, emotional attachment, brand trust, and service quality significantly influence loyalty (Eshiett & Eshiett, 2021; & Seduram, *et al.*, 2022; & Takahashi, *et al.*, 2023). In emerging markets, factors such as price value, compatibility, and effort expectancy play crucial roles in adoption decisions (Balakrishnan & Gan, 2023; & Eshiett & Eshiett, 2025). The Nigerian smartphone market is dominated by 2022 selected smartphone brands, these brands

have succeeded by understanding local market dynamics, offering dual-SIM capabilities, long battery life, and affordable pricing structures.

## Research Gaps

Despite extensive literature on smartphone adoption, several critical gaps exist:

1. **Limited Qualitative Exploration:** Most smartphone adoption studies employ quantitative surveys, lacking deep exploration of consumer decision-making processes and trust formation mechanisms.
2. **Contextual Gap:** Research on smartphone trial-ability specifically within Nigerian contexts remains scarce, with limited investigation of South-South regional dynamics.
3. **Trial-ability-Trust Nexus:** The relationship between trial-ability and trust formation in smartphone purchases has not been adequately explored, particularly in emerging markets with weak consumer protection frameworks.
4. **Brand-Specific Analysis:** Comparative analysis of how different smartphone brands operationalize trial-ability strategies in Nigerian markets is lacking.
5. **Post-Purchase Trust:** Literature focuses predominantly on pre-purchase factors, neglecting how trial experiences influence post-purchase trust and brand loyalty.
6. **Cultural Considerations:** The role of cultural factors, social influence, and community-based trust mechanisms in South-South Nigeria's smartphone adoption remains underexplored.
7. **Digital Marketing Collaboration:** While studies acknowledge the importance of digital marketing, the synergistic relationship between trial-ability mechanisms and digital marketing strategies in building trust requires further investigation.

## Research Methodology

**Research Design:** This study adopted a qualitative research design employing an exploratory approach to gain deep insights into the trial-ability-trust relationship in smartphone adoption. The qualitative methodology was selected for its appropriateness in exploring phenomena where theory is underdeveloped and contextual understanding is paramount.

## Population and Sampling

**Target Population:** Smartphone users and potential adopters in South-South Nigeria, specifically in Rivers, Cross River, Edo, Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, and Delta States.

**Sampling Strategy:** Purposive sampling was employed to select participants who had purchased or were considering purchasing smartphones from the 2022 top-ranking brands (Samsung, Apple, Xiome, Oppo, and Vivo.).

**Sample Size:** 35 participants comprising:

- i) 20 actual smartphone buyers (who completed purchases in 2022)
- ii) 10 potential buyers (currently in decision-making phase)
- iii) 5 retail representatives from authorized brand outlets

### **Data Collection Methods**

**In-Depth Interviews:** Semi-structured interviews lasting 45-60 minutes were conducted with each participant. Interview guides covered:

- i) Smartphone purchase decision-making processes
- ii) Trial experiences (in-store demonstrations, test periods, return policies)
- iii) Trust formation factors
- iv) Brand perceptions and preferences
- v) Post-purchase satisfaction and loyalty

**Focus Group Discussions:** Three focus groups (8-10 participants each) were conducted to explore collective perspectives on smartphone trial-ability and trust dynamics.

**Observation:** Non-participant observation was conducted at five retail outlets to understand trial mechanisms offered by different brands.

### **Data Analysis**

**Thematic Analysis** was employed following Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework: i) Familiarization with data through transcription and repeated reading, ii) Generation of initial codes, iii) Searching for themes, iv) Reviewing themes, v) Defining and naming themes, v) Production of the research report

**NVivo 12 software** was utilized to facilitate coding, theme identification, and data management.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Ethical approval was obtained from relevant institutional review boards. Informed consent was secured from all participants, ensuring confidentiality and voluntary participation. Data anonymization protocols were strictly observed.

### **Trustworthiness and Rigor**

Credibility was established through member checking, triangulation of data sources, and prolonged engagement with participants. Transferability was ensured through thick description of contexts and findings. Dependability and confirmability were achieved through audit trails and reflexive journaling.

### **Findings**

#### **1) Trial-ability as a Trust-Building Mechanism**

Participants overwhelmingly emphasized the importance of hands-on experience before purchase. Key sub-themes emerged:

- i) Physical Trial Experiences:** 78% of participants indicated they would not purchase a smartphone without physically handling it.
- ii) Functionality Testing:** Participants desired opportunities to test specific features including camera quality, battery performance, processing speed, and user interface navigation. Trust was significantly enhanced when retailers provided adequate time for comprehensive testing.
- iii) Return Policies and Trial Periods:** Brands offering 7-14 day trial periods with return options demonstrated higher trust levels. Participants expressed concern about purchasing decisions being final, particularly for premium devices.

#### **2) Brand-Specific Trial-ability Strategies**

- i) Oppo and Vivo:** These brands excelled in accessibility, with demonstration units widely available in retail outlets. Their pricing strategy allowed many consumers to take calculated risks, building initial trust through affordable entry points.

- ii) **Samsung:** Offered sophisticated trial experiences in authorized outlets, including virtual reality demonstrations and trade-in programs. However, accessibility remained limited to major urban centers.
- iii) **Apple:** Premium positioning limited physical trial-ability due to security concerns. Trust was built through brand reputation, peer recommendations, and perceived product quality rather than direct trial experiences.
- iv) **Xiaomi:** Leveraged online platforms with detailed video demonstrations and influencer partnerships to compensate for limited physical retail presence.

### 3) Trust Formation Beyond Trial-ability

- i) **Social Proof and Recommendations:** 82% of participants consulted friends, family, or online reviews before purchase. Trust extended beyond individual trial experiences to collective community validation.
- ii) **Warranty and After-Sales Service:** Comprehensive warranty coverage and accessible service centers significantly influenced trust levels. Participants expressed concerns about counterfeit products and unreliable after-sales support.
- iii) **Price-Value Perception:** Trust was intimately connected to perceived value for money. Participants sought assurance that trial experiences accurately reflected long-term product performance.

### 4) Digital Trial-ability Mechanisms

- i) **Online Reviews and Unboxing Videos:** YouTube unboxing videos and social media reviews served as virtual trial-ability mechanisms. Participants treated these as supplementary trust-building tools.
- ii) **Augmented Reality (AR) Try-Ons:** Younger participants (ages 18-30) expressed interest in AR applications allowing virtual product exploration, though awareness and adoption remained low.
- iii) **Influencer Endorsements:** Trust in social media influencers varied significantly. Authenticity and perceived expertise were critical determinants of influencer credibility.

### 5) Barriers to Effective Trial-ability

- i) **Counterfeit Concerns:** Fear of receiving counterfeit products even from seemingly legitimate outlets undermined trust in trial experiences.
- ii) **Limited Product Knowledge among Retail Staff:** Poorly trained sales representatives hindered effective trial experiences and trust formation.
- iii) **Restrictive Trial Policies:** Some retailers imposed time limitations on product trials, preventing thorough assessment and reducing trust.
- iv) **Economic Constraints:** High smartphone prices relative to average incomes limited the ability of consumers to experiment with multiple brands, intensifying the importance of initial trial experiences.

## **Discussion**

The findings confirm Rogers' assertion that trial-ability significantly influences innovation adoption rates. In the South-South Nigerian context, trial-ability serves multiple functions: risk reduction, information acquisition, and trust formation. The study reveals that trial-ability operates through both direct (physical trials) and indirect (social proof, reviews) mechanisms (Nasiri & Shokouhyar, 2021).

The prominence of social proof aligns with collectivist cultural orientations prevalent in Nigerian societies. Trust is not merely an individual calculation but a socially constructed phenomenon influenced by community validation (Adewale, 2019). This finding extends existing literature by highlighting the social dimensions of trial-ability in technology adoption.

Brand differences in trial-ability strategies reflect varying market positioning approaches. Brands such as (Oppo and Vivo) prioritize accessibility and affordability, compensating for limited brand heritage through extensive trial opportunities. Premium brands (Apple, Samsung) leverage aspirational positioning, where trust derives from perceived prestige as much as trial experiences.

The emergence of digital trial-ability mechanisms represents an evolving landscape. While physical trials remain dominant, virtual demonstrations increasingly supplement decision-making processes, particularly among younger, digitally-savvy consumers.

## **Expected Outcomes**

## **Theoretical Contributions**

- i) **Enhanced Understanding of Trial-ability-Trust Nexus:** The study provides nuanced insights into how trial-ability mechanisms influence trust formation in technology adoption contexts.
- ii) **Contextual Extension of Diffusion Theory:** Findings demonstrate how Rogers' Diffusion of Innovation Theory operates within Nigerian socio-economic contexts, revealing cultural adaptations and extensions.
- iii) **Multi-Dimensional Trust Model:** The research develops a framework illustrating how trial-ability, social proof, brand reputation, and service quality interact to form comprehensive trust perceptions.

### Market Development Outcomes

- i) **Increased Market Penetration:** Enhanced trial-ability mechanisms are expected to accelerate smartphone adoption rates in South-South Nigeria.
- ii) **Brand Differentiation:** Manufacturers implementing superior trial-ability strategies will gain competitive advantages.
- iii) **Consumer Empowerment:** Improved trial opportunities enable more informed purchase decisions, enhancing consumer satisfaction and reducing post-purchase dissonance.

### Conclusion

This qualitative study demonstrates that smartphone trial-ability significantly influences customer trust in South-South Nigeria. The ability to experiment with devices before purchase serves as a critical risk-mitigation strategy in contexts characterized by weak institutional frameworks and high counterfeit prevalence.

The research reveals that trial-ability operates through multifaceted mechanisms encompassing physical product trials, social proof validation, warranty assurances, and emerging digital demonstrations (Ashfaq, *et al.*, 2021). Trust formation extends beyond individual experiences to incorporate community validation, reflecting collectivist cultural orientations (Yazid, *et al.*, 2020).

Brand-specific strategies demonstrate varying approaches to trial-ability implementation. Chinese manufacturers prioritize accessibility and affordability, facilitating widespread trial

opportunities. Premium brands leverage aspirational positioning where brand reputation partially substitutes for extensive trial mechanisms.

The study identifies significant gaps in current practices, including inadequate staff training, restrictive trial policies, and persistent counterfeit concerns (Eshiett & Eshiett, 2025). Addressing these barriers requires coordinated efforts among manufacturers, retailers, and policymakers.

As Nigeria's smartphone market continues expanding, understanding trial-ability-trust dynamics becomes increasingly critical. This research provides foundational insights guiding strategic decision-making for market participants while contributing theoretically to innovation diffusion and consumer trust literature.

## **Recommendations**

Based on the study objectives and the findings, the following recommendation were made'

### **1) For Smartphone Manufacturers**

- i) **Establish Comprehensive Experience Centers:** Invest in dedicated experience centers in major South-South cities (Port Harcourt, Delta, Calabar. Uyo, Benin City, and Yenagoa) providing extensive trial opportunities across product ranges.
- ii) **Implement Flexible Return Policies:** Introduce 14-day no-questions-asked return policies, reducing perceived purchase risk and building consumer confidence.
- iii) **Enhance Digital Trial-ability Platforms:** Develop augmented reality applications and interactive virtual demonstrations accessible via mobile browsers and social media platforms.
- iv) **Strengthen After-Sales Service Networks:** Expand authorized service centers and establish mobile service units reaching semi-urban and rural areas.
- v) **Combat Counterfeit Products:** Implement blockchain-based authentication systems allowing consumers to verify product authenticity through smartphone apps.
- vi) **Localize Marketing Strategies:** Develop culturally resonant marketing campaigns emphasizing community validation and social proof elements.

### **2) For Retailers**

- i) **Invest in Staff Training Programs:** Conduct regular product knowledge training ensuring sales representatives can effectively demonstrate device capabilities and address consumer concerns.
- ii) **Create Comfortable Trial Environments:** Design retail spaces encouraging prolonged product interaction without pressure or time restrictions.
- iii) **Establish Trade-In Programs:** Implement device exchange programs reducing financial barriers for upgrades and facilitating trial of higher-tier models.
- iv) **Leverage Customer Testimonials:** Display authentic customer reviews and testimonials prominently in retail outlets and online platforms.
- v) **Implement Progressive Trial Policies:** Offer tiered trial programs allowing brief in-store trials, extended take-home trials for serious prospects, and money-back guarantees.

### 3) For Policymakers

- i) **Strengthen Consumer Protection Legislation:** Enact and enforce comprehensive consumer protection laws specifically addressing technology products and mandating minimum trial and warranty standards.
- ii) **Combat Counterfeit Trade:** Intensify efforts to eliminate counterfeit smartphone imports through enhanced customs enforcement and market surveillance.
- iii) **Promote Digital Literacy:** Implement public education campaigns teaching consumers to evaluate smartphones effectively and identify counterfeit products.
- iv) **Support Retail Infrastructure Development:** Provide incentives for establishment of authorized retail outlets in underserved areas, improving trial accessibility.
- v) **Establish Industry Standards:** Work with industry stakeholders to develop voluntary codes of conduct governing trial policies, warranty provisions, and after-sales service standards.

### 4) For Future Research

- i) **Longitudinal Studies:** Conduct longitudinal investigations tracking how trial experiences influence long-term brand loyalty and repurchase intentions.
- ii) **Quantitative Validation:** Develop and validate measurement instruments quantifying trial-ability dimensions and trust formation processes.

iii) **Comparative Regional Studies:** Replicate research across Nigeria's geopolitical zones identifying regional variations in trial-ability-trust relationships.

iv) **Technology Evolution Studies:** Investigate how emerging technologies (5G, foldable phones, AI integration) alter trial-ability requirements and trust dynamics.

**Cross-Cultural Investigations:** Conduct comparative studies across West African markets identifying universal and context-specific trial-ability factors.

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