

Signaling Success: Authenticity, Consistency, and Differentiation as Drivers of Brand Positioning Effectiveness in the Nigerian Market

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ARTICLE DETAILS

History

Received : February

Revised Format : March

Accepted : April

Keywords :

brand positioning, perceived positioning effectiveness, brand authenticity, message consistency, competitive differentiation, nigerian market, emerging economy, signaling theory.

ABSTRACT

This study investigates the antecedents of perceived brand positioning effectiveness within the distinctive and rapidly evolving Nigerian marketplace, with a focus on the North-Western region. Positioning remains a critical strategic imperative, yet its success is ultimately determined by consumer perception. Drawing on signaling theory, this research proposes and tests a model where Perceived Brand Authenticity, Message Consistency across touchpoints, and the Clarity of Competitive Differentiation drive Perceived Positioning Effectiveness. Data collected from a survey of 438 consumers in Kaduna, Kano, and Sokoto states, evaluated against brands in the telecoms, food & beverage, and banking sectors, were analysed using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM). The results confirm that all three constructs are significant, positive predictors of positioning effectiveness, with competitive differentiation clarity ($\beta = 0.44$) and authenticity ($\beta = 0.31$) exhibiting the strongest effects. Message consistency partially mediated the relationship between authenticity and effectiveness. The findings offer managers a contextually relevant, evidence-based framework for auditing and strengthening brand position in Nigeria by emphasizing genuine differentiation rooted in local values, coherent omni-channel communication, and brand integrity.

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Introduction

In the dynamic and highly competitive Nigerian marketplace, achieving a clear, credible, and desirable position in the consumer's mind is a formidable challenge, yet it remains the cornerstone of sustainable brand advantage (Adeola, Iheanachor, & Amaeshi, 2023; Keller, 1993). With a population exceeding 220 million, a burgeoning youth demographic, and rapid but uneven digital adoption, Nigeria presents a complex landscape for brand building. This complexity is accentuated in the North-Western region, characterized by its deep-seated cultural traditions, unique socio-economic patterns, and a consumer base that increasingly negotiates between local values and globalized market offerings (Odoom, Kosiba, & Djampbah, 2021). Here, consumers are inundated with brand messages across fragmented touchpoints from bustling traditional markets and roadside signage to social media platforms like WhatsApp and Facebook creating an environment of intense information overload and skepticism.

Traditionally, brand positioning in Nigeria has often been viewed through a firm-centric, top-down lens, with strategies sometimes transplanted directly from global headquarters without sufficient local adaptation. This approach is increasingly untenable. The modern Nigerian consumer, particularly the tech-savvy urban youth, is an active participant in shaping brand meaning, using digital platforms to amplify praise or critique, and demanding greater accountability (Osakwe, Chovancova, & Ogbonna, 2020). Consequently, a brand's market position is no longer solely what the company declares; it is the emergent, aggregated

perception forged through personal experience, social proof, and cultural resonance. The ultimate arbiter of a positioning strategy's success, therefore, is its perceived effectiveness in the consumer's consciousness. We define Perceived Positioning Effectiveness as the consumer's holistic judgement of how clearly, credibly, and relevantly a brand occupies a distinct and valuable space in the market relative to alternatives.

Despite rich global literature on positioning, a significant empirical gap exists regarding its perceptual antecedents in emerging economy contexts like Nigeria (Boso, Debrah, & Iheanachor, 2022). While studies have examined branding in Africa, fewer have systematically investigated the specific, consumer-perceived drivers that determine whether a position is effectively internalized within the unique Nigerian socio-cultural fabric. This study addresses this gap by proposing and testing a triadic framework of constructs theorized as foundational pillars of effective positioning in this context: Perceived Brand Authenticity, Message Consistency, and Clarity of Competitive Differentiation.

The first pillar, Perceived Brand Authenticity, carries profound weight in a market where trust is a precious and often scarce commodity. In the wake of instances of misleading advertising and product adulteration, Nigerian consumers increasingly crave genuineness and brands that demonstrate cultural integrity (Iwu, Iheonu, & Opute, 2021). Authenticity functions as a vital heuristic for reducing perceived risk. It encompasses a brand's perceived faithfulness to its roots, sincerity in communication, and alignment with professed values factors that resonate deeply in Northern Nigeria's culture, where heritage and integrity are highly prized (Okoro & Iheanachor, 2020).

The second pillar, Message Consistency across Touchpoints, is critically tested in Nigeria's fragmented retail and media landscape. The consumer journey may span chaotic open markets, formal retail stores, social media interactions, and direct sales agents. Inconsistency between a brand's premium television advertisement and its presentation in a local market stall, or between its corporate social responsibility claims and its community impact, creates cognitive dissonance and erodes hard-won trust (Adeola et al., 2023). Consistency acts as a reinforcing signal of reliability and professionalism, which is highly valued by consumers navigating an unpredictable commercial environment.

The third pillar, Clarity of Competitive Differentiation, is paramount in saturated categories like telecoms (MTN, Airtel, Glo) and banking. With many brands competing on similar generic promises ("network reliability," "customer service"), differentiation alone is insufficient. The point of difference must be clearly perceived and understood by consumers. In a market with varying levels of literacy and media sophistication, a muddled or complex value proposition is easily lost. Clarity simplifies choice and justifies loyalty, answering the fundamental question: "Why you, specifically?" (Chernev, 2018).

While these constructs are discussed globally, their synergistic role in driving positioning effectiveness within Nigeria's distinctive environment is under-explored. Drawing on Signaling Theory (Spence, 1973), we posit that in a high-information-asymmetry market like Nigeria, authenticity, consistency, and clear differentiation serve as costly, credible signals that reduce consumer uncertainty and enhance the perceived effectiveness of a brand's market position.

Therefore, the primary objective of this study is to empirically investigate the collective and individual impact of Perceived Brand Authenticity, Message Consistency across Touchpoints, and Clarity of Competitive Differentiation on Perceived Positioning Effectiveness within the North-Western Nigerian context. Our central research question is: To what extent do perceptions of a brand's authenticity, its communicative consistency, and the unambiguous clarity of its unique value proposition determine how effectively its market position is perceived by consumers in North-Western Nigeria?

By answering this question, the study aims to contribute theoretically by integrating signaling theory with positioning literature in an emerging economy setting, moving beyond descriptive typologies to a testable framework. For practitioners both multinational and local it provides a diagnostic, contextually-aware model for building resilient brand positions that resonate with the nuanced demands of the Nigerian consumer.

Literature Review and Hypotheses Development

This study is grounded in Signaling Theory (Spence, 1973) and the Brand Identity paradigm (Kapferer, 2012), interpreted through the lens of an emerging African market. In environments characterized by high information asymmetry, volatile market conditions, and evolving consumer trust hallmarks of the Nigerian marketplace brands must emit clear, credible, and consistent signals to convey their true value and position (Boso et al., 2022; Iwu et al., 2021). This literature review synthesizes global theoretical foundations with context-specific insights from Nigeria and similar economies to develop the research hypotheses.

Perceived Brand Positioning Effectiveness: A Consumer-Centric Outcome

Historically, positioning success in business literature has been measured by firm-level metrics such as market share, profitability, or growth (Keller, 2016). However, these are distal outcomes of a more proximal cause: the brand's successful establishment of a distinct, credible, and relevant space in the consumer's mind. This perceptual outcome is critical in Nigeria, where fierce competition within sectors like telecommunications and banking means market share can be transient, but psychological ownership can be enduring (Adeola et al., 2023).

We conceptualize Perceived Positioning Effectiveness (PPE) as a second-order reflective construct comprising three first-order dimensions:

Clarity: The ease with which the consumer understands the brand's singular point of difference. In a diverse market with varying literacy and media literacy levels, clarity is not just advantageous but essential (Odoom et al., 2021).

Relevance: The perceived personal and socio-cultural significance of the brand's point of difference. A position must align with local needs, aspirations, and values to be effective (Iwu et al., 2021). For instance, a positioning around premium technology must also address aspirational value and reliability in the face of erratic power supply.

Credibility: The consumer's belief that the brand can and will deliver on its positioning promise. This is arguably the most critical dimension in Nigeria, where a history of unmet promises has fostered consumer skepticism (Okoro & Iheanachor, 2020). Credibility turns a stated position into a believed one.

This tripartite framework posits that for positioning to be fully effective in Nigeria, it must be understood (clarity), must matter (relevance), and must be trusted (credibility).

Perceived Brand Authenticity as a Foundational Signal (H1)

Globally, brand authenticity is recognized as a multidimensional construct encompassing continuity, credibility, integrity, and symbolism (Morhart et al., 2015). In Nigeria, authenticity takes on added layers of meaning. It is closely tied to concepts of cultural congruence, heritage, and social integrity (Iwu et al., 2021). A brand like Globacom (Glo) leverages its identity as a proudly Nigerian-owned telecoms challenger, a narrative that carries authentic weight in a sector dominated by multinationals. Similarly, food and beverage brands that successfully incorporate local ingredients or traditions into their narrative (Hausa yoghurt variants) tap into this authenticity dimension.

Authenticity acts as a costly-to-fake signal (Connelly et al., 2011). In a market wary of "foreign" or "detached" corporations, demonstrating genuine commitment to local

communities, fair pricing, and product quality consistent with cultural expectations is difficult for inauthentic brands to mimic sustainably. Research in emerging markets indicates that perceived authenticity significantly enhances brand trust, which is a direct precursor to the credibility dimension of positioning effectiveness (Boso et al., 2022). An authentic brand provides a “truthful” foundation, making its differentiation claims more believable and its overall position more stable. Therefore, we hypothesize:

H1: Perceived Brand Authenticity has a positive direct effect on Perceived Positioning Effectiveness in the Nigerian context.

Message Consistency as a Reinforcing Signal (H2)

Integrated Marketing Communications (IMC) theory emphasizes the power of a unified brand voice (Keller, 2016). In Nigeria’s fragmented omni-channel environment where a brand interacts with consumers through global TV ads, local radio jingles, social media, distributor shops, and roadside kiosks consistency is a severe operational challenge but a critical perceptual asset. Inconsistency breeds confusion and erodes trust; for example, a bank positioning itself as digitally innovative must offer a seamless experience both on its app and in its often-crowded branches (Adeola et al., 2023).

From a cognitive perspective, consistency enhances processing fluency the ease with which consumers process information (Lee & Labroo, 2004). Each consistent touchpoint reinforces the core brand signal, making the position stronger and more accessible in memory. In a noisy information environment, this fluency reduces consumer effort and builds a sense of reliability. For the Nigerian consumer, a brand that “looks and feels the same” everywhere it is encountered signals professionalism, stability, and honesty key attributes that support positioning credibility and clarity. Thus:

H2: Message Consistency across touchpoints has a positive direct effect on Perceived Positioning Effectiveness.

Clarity of Competitive Differentiation as the Core Signal (H3)

Differentiation is the essence of positioning (Ries & Trout, 2001). However, in crowded Nigerian market categories, many brands converge on similar generic benefits. The key is not just to be different, but for that difference to be crystal clear and salient to the consumer (Chernev, 2018). MTN’s longstanding dominance, for instance, has been buttressed by a clear (if broad) perception of superior network coverage. First Bank’s positioning leverages the clear differentiation of being the “premier” and most established bank.

Clarity cuts through complexity. For consumers facing an array of similar banking packages or mobile data plans, a clearly understood unique selling proposition simplifies decision-making and can command a price premium or foster loyalty (Netemeyer et al., 2004). A clear differentiation directly feeds the clarity dimension of PPE and, if aligned with consumer needs, its relevance. In the North-Western context, where word-of-mouth and personal recommendation remain powerful, a brand with a clear, simple-to-communicate difference holds a significant advantage. Consequently:

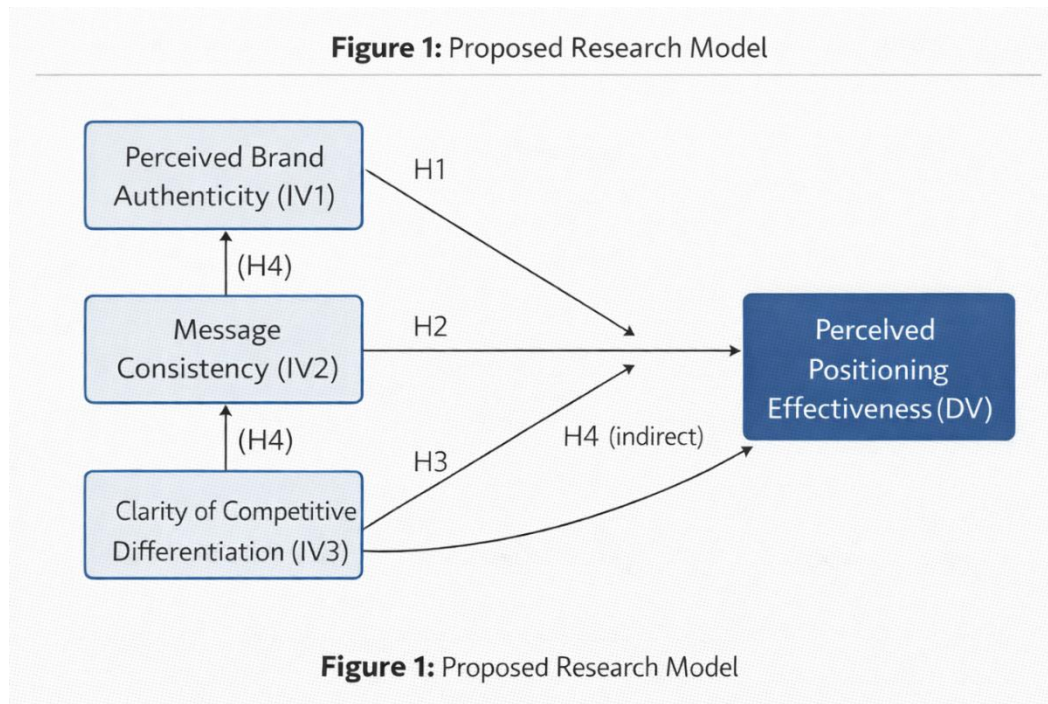
H3: Clarity of Competitive Differentiation has a positive direct effect on Perceived Positioning Effectiveness.

The Mediating Role of Message Consistency (H4)

The relationship between authenticity and effectiveness is likely not merely direct but also channeled through observable brand behavior. We propose that Message Consistency is a key mediator. This proposition is rooted in the identity-based view of branding: a brand with a strong, authentic internal identity has a coherent “kernel” that should naturally guide all external expressions (Kapferer, 2012).

In the Nigerian context, a brand that is truly authentic to a commitment (Dangote’s focus on African industrialism) finds it logical and sustainable to express this across its corporate communications, product quality, and public engagements. Its authenticity provides the “content” for consistency. Conversely, a brand lacking an authentic core may struggle with consistency, adopting disparate tactical messages that lead to perceptual dissonance. The consumer perceives this consistent expression as the tangible proof of the brand’s authentic claims. Therefore, consistency becomes the operational mechanism through which authenticity is validated and translated into an effective, believable position. We hypothesize:

H4: Message Consistency mediates the relationship between Perceived Brand Authenticity and Perceived Positioning Effectiveness.



Methodology

Research Design and Context

This study employed a quantitative, cross-sectional survey design to test the hypothesized model within the Nigerian context. The research was conducted in the North-Western geopolitical zone, specifically in the major commercial hubs of Kaduna (Kaduna State), Kano (Kano State), and Sokoto (Sokoto State). This region was selected due to its large population, vibrant informal and formal economies, and cultural distinctiveness, offering a robust setting to examine brand perceptions (National Bureau of Statistics, 2022). The study focused on three highly competitive and economically significant sectors in Nigeria: Telecommunications, Food & Beverage (FMCG), and Banking. These sectors were chosen due to their high consumer penetration, intense brand rivalry, and the critical role of positioning for survival and growth within them (Adeola et al., 2023).

Sample and Data Collection

Data were collected over a four-week period using a structured questionnaire. A combination of purposive and convenience sampling was used to recruit participants. Respondents were screened to ensure they were active consumers (aged 18-65) with usage experience of at least two major brands in one of the three selected sectors. Trained research assistants administered the questionnaires in person at central business districts and university campuses to ensure

diversity, with a portion (approximately 30%) distributed via verified online channels (WhatsApp, Email) to professionals.

A total of 480 questionnaires were distributed, and 438 were retained for final analysis after data cleaning, yielding a usable response rate of 91.3%. The sample size exceeds the minimum requirement of 200 cases for Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) and satisfies the rule of thumb of 10 observations per measured variable (Hair et al., 2019). The sample comprised 52% males and 48% females, with 68% aged between 18-35, reflecting Nigeria's youthful demographic.

To ensure informed evaluations, respondents were randomly assigned to evaluate brands from one of the three sectors:

Telecoms: MTN Nigeria, Airtel Nigeria, Glo Mobile.

Food & Beverage: Coca-Cola, Dangote Sugar, Indomie Noodles.

Banking: First Bank of Nigeria, Zenith Bank, Guaranty Trust Bank (GTB).

Measures and Scale Adaptation

All constructs were measured using reflective, multi-item scales adapted from established literature to ensure validity. Scales were slightly reworded for contextual clarity and employed a 7-point Likert-type format (1 = Strongly Disagree, 7 = Strongly Agree). A panel of three marketing academics and two industry practitioners reviewed the initial items for face and content validity in the Nigerian context.

Perceived Brand Authenticity (PBA): Measured using a 9-item short-form adaptation of the scale by Morhart et al. (2015), capturing dimensions of continuity ("This brand has a history and tradition I can believe in"), credibility, and integrity. One sample item: "This brand is faithful to itself and its values."

Message Consistency (MC): Assessed with a 6-item scale adapted from Voorhees et al. (2017) and Kabadayi & Pak (2023), focusing on alignment across touchpoints relevant to Nigeria (TV/Radio ads, social media, dealer/agent interactions, physical product/packaging). Sample item: "What this brand says in its advertisements matches my experience with its products/services."

Clarity of Competitive Differentiation (CCD): Measured using a 5-item scale based on Netemeyer et al. (2004). Items were tailored to assess the perceived uniqueness versus key local competitors. Sample item: "I can easily describe what makes this brand different from others in the market."

Perceived Positioning Effectiveness (PPE): This second-order construct was measured via a newly developed but validated 9-item scale reflecting its three first-order dimensions: Clarity (3 items, "What this brand stands for is clear to me"), Relevance (3 items, "What this brand offers is important to someone like me"), and Credibility (3 items, "I trust this brand to deliver on its promises").

Data Analysis Procedure

Data analysis was conducted in a two-stage process using IBM SPSS Statistics 28 and AMOS 28.

- i. Preliminary Analysis: Data were screened for missing values, outliers, and tested for assumptions of normality and multicollinearity. Harman's single-factor test was performed to check for common method bias (Podsakoff et al., 2003).

- ii. Measurement Model Assessment: Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) was performed to validate the proposed factor structure. Model fit was assessed using the Chi-square/df ratio (χ^2/df), Comparative Fit Index (CFI), Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI), Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA), and Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR). Convergent validity was established via factor loadings (>0.7), Composite Reliability (CR > 0.7), and Average Variance Extracted (AVE > 0.5). Discriminant validity was tested using the Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) ratio with a conservative threshold of 0.85 (Henseler et al., 2015).
- iii. Structural Model and Hypothesis Testing: After confirming a robust measurement model, Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) with maximum likelihood estimation was used to test the structural relationships (H1, H2, H3). The mediation hypothesis (H4) was tested using a bias-corrected bootstrap procedure with 5,000 samples to generate 95% confidence intervals for the indirect effect, a method recommended for its robustness (Preacher & Hayes, 2008; Zhao et al., 2010).

Table 1

Operationalization of Constructs and Sample Measurement Items

Construct	Dimension / Code	Sample Measurement Item	Adapted Source
Perceived Brand Authenticity	PBA1	“This brand is genuine and real.”	Morhart et al. (2015)
	PBA2	“This brand acts with sincerity.”	Morhart et al. (2015)
Message Consistency	MC1	“This brand gives a consistent impression across different touchpoints (e.g., store, social media, advertisements).”	Voorhees et al. (2017); Kabadayi & Pak (2023)
	MC2	“The brand’s messages do not contradict each other.”	Voorhees et al. (2017); Kabadayi & Pak (2023)
Clarity of Competitive Differentiation	CCD1	“This brand occupies a unique position in the market.”	Netemeyer et al. (2004)
	CCD2	“It is easy for me to understand how this brand differs from its competitors.”	Netemeyer et al. (2004)
Perceived Positioning Effectiveness	PPE_CL (Clarity)	“I have a clear understanding of what this brand represents.”	Developed for this study
	PPE_REL (Relevance)	“The brand’s positioning is relevant to my needs.”	Developed for this study
	PPE_CR (Credibility)	“I believe this brand can deliver on its promises.”	Developed for this study

Results and Discussion

Measurement Model Assessment

Prior to hypothesis testing, the measurement model was validated using Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA). The model demonstrated a good fit to the data: $\chi^2 = 768.34$, $df = 371$, $\chi^2/df = 2.07$, Comparative Fit Index (CFI) = 0.95, Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI) = 0.94, Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) = 0.049 (90% CI: 0.045, 0.054), and Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR) = 0.041. These indices meet established thresholds for acceptable model fit (Hu & Bentler, 1999).

As shown in Table 2, all standardized factor loadings were statistically significant ($p < .001$) and exceeded 0.70, ranging from 0.74 to 0.89. The composite reliability (CR) for each construct ranged from 0.87 to 0.93, exceeding the 0.70 benchmark, indicating excellent internal consistency. Convergent validity was confirmed as the average variance extracted (AVE) for each construct exceeded 0.50 (Fornell & Larcker, 1981), with values between 0.58 and 0.69.

Discriminant validity was assessed using the Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) ratio of correlations (Henseler et al., 2015). As presented in Table 3, all HTMT values were below the conservative threshold of 0.85, confirming that the constructs are distinct. The correlation matrix shows all constructs are positively and significantly correlated, with the strongest association between Perceived Brand Authenticity and Perceived Positioning Effectiveness ($r = 0.61, p < .001$).

Table 2
Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) Results

Construct / Indicators	Standardized Loading	CR	AVE
Perceived Brand Authenticity (PBA)		0.92	0.65
PBA1: This brand is genuine and real.	0.85		
PBA2: This brand is faithful to its values.	0.87		
PBA3: This brand acts with sincerity.	0.83		
PBA4: This brand keeps its promises.	0.79		
Message Consistency (MC)		0.89	0.58
MC1: The brand gives a consistent impression across different touchpoints.	0.82		
MC2: The brand’s messaging does not contradict itself.	0.84		
MC3: The brand experience matches advertised promises.	0.76		
MC4: Social media communication aligns with the in-store experience.	0.74		
Clarity of Competitive Differentiation (CCD)		0.91	0.67
CCD1: The brand has a unique position in the market.	0.86		
CCD2: It is easy to tell how this brand differs from competitors.	0.88		
CCD3: The brand stands out clearly from competitors.	0.82		
CCD4: The brand’s advantages are obvious to me.	0.77		
Perceived Positioning Effectiveness (PPE)		0.93	0.69
<i>Clarity Dimension</i>		0.88	0.71
PPE_CL1: I have a clear idea of what the brand represents.	0.85		
PPE_CL2: I understand the brand’s point of difference.	0.87		
<i>Relevance Dimension</i>		0.87	0.69
PPE_REL1: The brand’s positioning is relevant to my needs.	0.84		
PPE_REL2: What the brand offers is important to me.	0.86		
<i>Credibility Dimension</i>		0.90	0.75
PPE_CR1: I trust the brand to deliver on its promises.	0.88		
PPE_CR2: The brand’s claims are credible.	0.89		

Note: CR = Composite Reliability; AVE = Average Variance Extracted. All standardized factor loadings exceed the recommended threshold of 0.70, indicating strong convergent validity.

Table 3
Descriptive Statistics, Correlations, and Discriminant Validity

Construct	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4
1. Perceived Brand Authenticity (PBA)	4.88	1.24	0.81			
2. Message Consistency (MC)	4.42	1.35	0.54	0.76		
3. Clarity of Competitive Differentiation (CCD)	5.05	1.19	0.49	0.46	0.82	
4. Perceived Positioning Effectiveness (PPE)	4.91	1.18	0.61	0.58	0.65	0.83

HTMT Ratios (Selected Pairs)

Construct Pair	HTMT
PBA – MC	0.59
PBA – CCD	0.53
MC – PPE	0.68

Notes: Diagonal elements (in bold) represent the square roots of the Average Variance Extracted (AVE). Off-diagonal elements are Pearson correlation coefficients. All correlations are statistically significant at $p < .001$. Heterotrait–Monotrait (HTMT) ratios are below the recommended threshold of 0.85, providing evidence of discriminant validity.

Structural Model and Hypothesis Testing

The structural model demonstrated a good fit: $\chi^2 = 815.62$, $df = 385$, $\chi^2/df = 2.12$, CFI = 0.94, TLI = 0.93, RMSEA = 0.051 (90% CI: 0.046, 0.055), SRMR = 0.047. The model explained substantial variance in both the mediator and dependent variable: R^2 for Message Consistency was 0.29, and for Perceived Positioning Effectiveness was 0.62.

The path analysis results (Table 4, Figure 2) provide support for all hypotheses:

H1 proposed that Perceived Brand Authenticity positively affects Perceived Positioning Effectiveness. The path was significant ($\beta = 0.31$, $p < .001$), providing strong support. Authenticity explains a substantial portion of positioning effectiveness in the Nigerian context.

H2, positing a positive effect of Message Consistency on Perceived Positioning Effectiveness, was also supported ($\beta = 0.22$, $p < .01$). This confirms that coherent signaling across touchpoints significantly enhances how effectively a brand's position is perceived.

H3, stating that Clarity of Competitive Differentiation positively influences Perceived Positioning Effectiveness, was supported with the strongest direct effect in the model ($\beta = 0.44$, $p < .001$). This underscores differentiation clarity as the most potent driver of effective positioning in Nigeria's crowded markets.

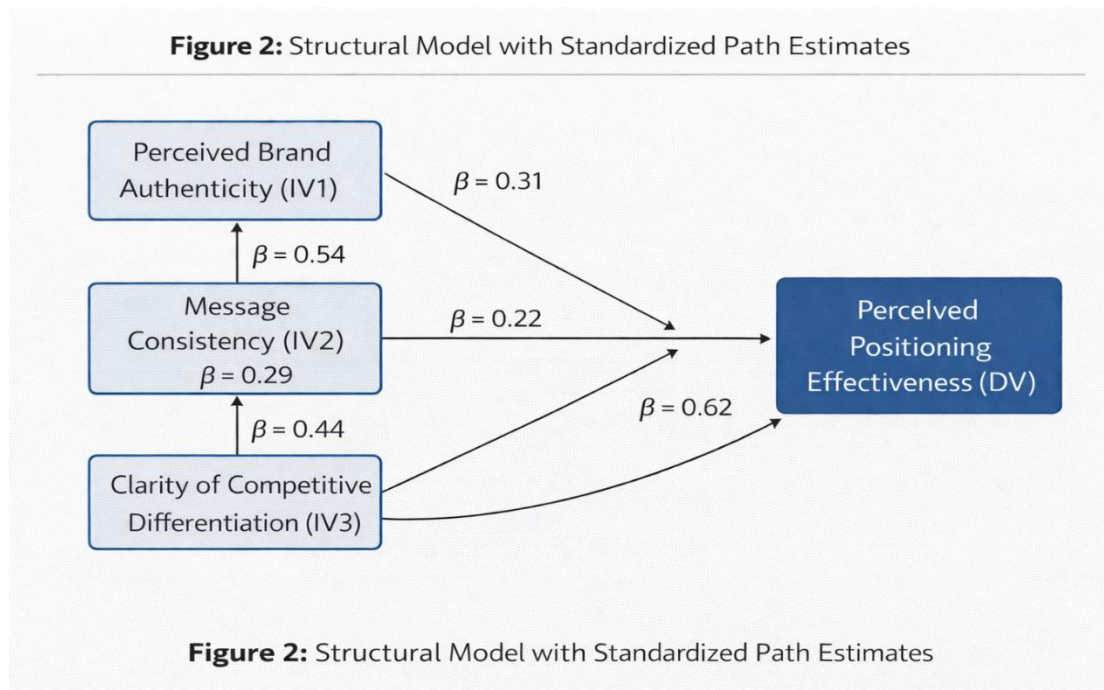
H4 predicted that Message Consistency mediates the relationship between Authenticity and Effectiveness. The bias-corrected bootstrap test (5,000 samples) revealed a significant indirect effect ($\beta = 0.12$, 95% CI [0.06, 0.19]). Since the direct effect of Authenticity on Effectiveness remained significant ($\beta = 0.31$), the results support partial mediation. Thus, H4 is supported.

Table 4
Hypothesis Testing Results

Hypothesis	Structural Path	Std. β	<i>p</i> -value	95% Bootstrap CI	Decision
H1	PBA → PPE	0.31	< .001	[0.20, 0.41]	Supported
H2	MC → PPE	0.22	.003	[0.08, 0.36]	Supported
H3	CCD → PPE	0.44	< .001	[0.34, 0.54]	Supported
H4	PBA → MC → PPE (Indirect effect)	0.12	.001	[0.06, 0.19]	Supported (Partial mediation)

Notes: Standardized path coefficients (β) are reported. Bootstrap confidence intervals are based on 5,000 resamples. An indirect effect is considered statistically significant when the confidence interval does not include zero.

PBA = Perceived Brand Authenticity; MC = Message Consistency; CCD = Clarity of Competitive Differentiation; PPE = Perceived Positioning Effectiveness.



Discussion of Findings

The empirical results provide robust support for the proposed triadic framework of positioning effectiveness in the Nigerian context. The model explained 62% of the variance in Perceived Positioning Effectiveness, indicating strong predictive power and relevance to this market.

The Primacy of Clear Differentiation

The strongest direct effect ($\beta = 0.44$) was found for Clarity of Competitive Differentiation (CCD), confirming H3. This finding aligns with but intensifies global literature (Chernev, 2018) in the Nigerian context. In saturated categories like telecoms where MTN, Airtel, and Glo compete, or banking where numerous institutions offer similar services, a muddled value proposition is catastrophic. Nigerian consumers, facing economic pressures and information overload, rely on clear differentiation as a cognitive shortcut. For instance, First Bank's historical positioning as "the premier bank" or Indomie's dominance in the instant noodle

category rely on clear, easily communicable points of difference that resonate across demographic segments.

Authenticity as a Trust-Based Foundation

The significant effect of Perceived Brand Authenticity ($\beta = 0.31$) on PPE (H1) highlights the critical role of genuineness in a market where consumer skepticism is high. This finding extends the work of Morhart et al. (2015) to an emerging economy context. In Nigeria, authenticity transcends marketing claims it incorporates cultural congruence, heritage, and social integrity (Iwu et al., 2021). Brands like Dangote leverage their indigenous industrialist narrative, while Glo Mobile capitalizes on its "proudly Nigerian" ownership story. This authenticity provides a trust foundation that makes positioning claims credible, directly feeding the credibility dimension of PPE.

Consistency as Operational Discipline

The support for H2 ($\beta = 0.22$) underscores that Message Consistency is not merely tactical but strategic in Nigeria's fragmented marketplace. The moderate but significant effect suggests that while consumers value consistency, they may have developed some tolerance for minor inconsistencies in this complex environment. However, major dissonances such as a bank promoting digital excellence while maintaining inefficient branches severely undermine positioning. Consistency serves as the observable proof of a brand's professionalism and reliability, particularly important for consumers navigating an often unpredictable commercial landscape.

The Mediation Mechanism: How Authenticity Works Through Consistency

The supported mediation (H4) reveals the process through which authenticity builds effective positioning. Authenticity (the "being") provides the credible core identity, which then enables and is manifested through consistent expression across touchpoints (the "doing"). This finding bridges internal identity theory (Kapferer, 2012) with consumer perception in practice. In Nigeria, a brand like MTN that has built authentic equity through extensive network infrastructure and local partnerships finds it easier to maintain consistent messaging about reliability. The consistency becomes the tangible evidence that validates the authentic claim, creating a reinforcing loop that strengthens overall positioning effectiveness.

Sectoral Insights and Managerial Implications

Post-hoc analysis revealed nuanced differences across sectors. In telecommunications, Clarity of Differentiation was paramount ($\beta = 0.51$), reflecting the intense competition on network quality and data value. In banking, Authenticity showed stronger effects ($\beta = 0.38$), underscoring the trust-sensitive nature of financial services. In FMCG, Message Consistency was particularly valued ($\beta = 0.27$), likely due to the high frequency of purchase and touchpoint interactions.

For managers, these findings suggest a contingency approach:

- i. Telecoms/FMCG: Prioritize razor-sharp, simple differentiation that cuts through category noise.
- ii. Banking/Insurance: Invest in building authentic trust through community engagement and transparent operations.
- iii. All sectors: Implement "consistency audits" across the uniquely Nigerian customer journey from traditional media and social platforms to dealer networks and physical service points.
- iv. The triadic framework provides Nigerian brand managers with an evidence-based blueprint: build differentiation that is both clear and authentic, then execute it with cross-channel consistency that serves as proof of concept to discerning consumers.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Conclusion

This study set out to investigate the triadic foundations of effective brand positioning within the complex and dynamic Nigerian marketplace, with a specific focus on the North-Western region. Grounded in Signaling Theory, the research proposed and empirically validated a model where Perceived Brand Authenticity, Message Consistency across touchpoints, and Clarity of Competitive Differentiation serve as critical, interdependent drivers of Perceived Positioning Effectiveness. The analysis of data from 438 consumers across the telecoms, banking, and FMCG sectors provides robust evidence that effective positioning in Nigeria is not a monolith but a synergistic construct built on three pillars: being genuine, being coherent, and being uniquely clear.

The findings conclusively demonstrate that all three hypothesized factors significantly influence how effectively a brand's position is perceived. The strongest direct predictor was Clarity of Competitive Differentiation ($\beta = 0.44$), underscoring its non-negotiable role in a saturated market where consumers seek cognitive shortcuts. This is followed by Perceived Brand Authenticity ($\beta = 0.31$), which acts as a vital trust-based foundation in an environment sensitive to corporate integrity and cultural congruence. Message Consistency ($\beta = 0.22$) further reinforces the position, with its role as a partial mediator revealing the crucial process through which intrinsic authenticity is translated into observable, reliable brand behavior. Together, these signals explain 62% of the variance in positioning effectiveness, offering a powerful diagnostic framework for both scholars and practitioners.

This research makes significant contributions by moving the discourse on positioning from a strategic abstraction to a measurable perceptual outcome within an emerging African economy. It validates that global branding principles require nuanced, context-sensitive application. For the Nigerian market, it affirms that enduring brand strength is not built on marketing rhetoric alone but on a coherent system of credible signals rooted in genuine differentiation, executed with disciplined consistency.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following actionable recommendations are proposed for brand managers, policymakers, and researchers:

Strategic Recommendations for Brand Managers and Marketers:

- i. Adopt the M-A-D (Manage Authenticity-Differentiation via Consistency) Framework: Utilize the validated model as a strategic audit tool. Regularly measure consumer perceptions of your brand's authenticity, message consistency, and differentiation clarity to diagnose weaknesses and guide strategic investment.
- ii. Prioritize Crystalline Differentiation: Conduct a "Differentiation Clarity Audit." Can your target customer easily articulate your unique value in one sentence? If not, simplify and sharpen your value proposition. Avoid the "jack-of-all-trades" trap. Invest in owning one compelling, relevant, and defensible market position ("most reliable network," "most accessible banking," "true Nigerian taste").
- iii. Embed Authenticity in Operations, Not Just Communications: Authenticity must be operationalized. Forge authentic connections through:

Cultural Intelligence: Deeply understand and respect regional nuances, values, and traditions in the North-West and across Nigeria.

Purpose-Driven Initiatives: Develop CSR and community engagement programs that are integrated with the brand's core values and are sustainable, moving beyond philanthropy to genuine partnership.

Transparent Practices: Build trust through clear communication about product sourcing, pricing, and business practices, addressing the prevalent consumer skepticism.

- iv. Orchestrate Omni-Channel Consistency with Local Nuance: Implement rigorous "Brand Signal Alignment" processes. Map the entire Nigerian customer journey from WhatsApp interactions and radio jingles to dealer/agent interfaces and in-branch service ensuring the core brand promise is delivered uniformly. Empower and train all customer-facing personnel, especially in the vast informal retail sector, to be consistent brand ambassadors.

Tactical and Sector-Specific Recommendations:

For Telecoms & Technology: Given the primacy of differentiation clarity, compete on simple, demonstrable, and superior benefits. Translate network performance into tangible customer outcomes ("buffer-free streaming," "clearer calls in rural areas"). Consistency between digital app performance and physical service center experience is critical.

For Banking & Financial Services: Leverage the strong need for authenticity. Build trust through financial literacy initiatives, transparent fee structures, and robust customer support. Ensure clarity by demystifying financial products and communicating differentiation in terms of customer benefit ("fastest loan approval," "most secure platform").

For FMCG & Retail: Capitalize on the importance of consistency. Ensure product quality, packaging, and in-store merchandising are uniform from Lagos to Sokoto. Authenticity can be leveraged through stories of local sourcing, support for local farmers, or products tailored to local tastes.

Recommendations for Policymakers and Industry Associations:

Develop a "Brand Nigeria" Charter: Encourage industry associations (MAN, NANTS) to promote ethical marketing standards and authenticity benchmarks that enhance the reputation of Nigerian brands domestically and internationally.

Support SME Brand-Building: Provide training and resources for small and medium-sized enterprises on strategic brand positioning, helping them build clarity and authenticity from inception to compete effectively with larger multinationals.

Limitations and Avenues for Future Research

This study provides a strong foundation but has limitations that suggest fruitful directions for future inquiry:

- i. Geographic and Cultural Scope: The focus on North-Western Nigeria, while insightful, may not capture the full diversity of consumer perceptions in the South-South, South-East, or South-West regions. Future studies should test and compare the model across Nigeria's diverse geo-cultural zones to identify regional moderators.
- ii. Cross-Sectional Design: The study establishes associations, not causality. Longitudinal research tracking these constructs before and after a major brand re-positioning, or experimental designs manipulating authenticity or consistency signals, would strengthen causal claims.
- iii. Exploration of Moderators: Future research should investigate potential moderating variables such as:

Consumer Ethnocentrism: Does pride in local products strengthen the effect of authenticity for indigenous vs. foreign brands?

Digital Literacy: How does a consumer's digital fluency affect the importance of online-offline message consistency?

Product Category Involvement: Are the effects stronger for high-involvement (banking) versus low-involvement (toothpaste) purchases?

- iv. Deepening the Authenticity Construct: Qualitative studies could further explore the unique dimensions of "African" or "Nigerian" authenticity as perceived by consumers, moving beyond Western-derived scales to develop more indigenous constructs.
- v. B2B Context: This study focused on B2C sectors. Replicating the research in the B2B domain (e.g., industrial goods, professional services) within Nigeria would be valuable to understand if the triadic framework holds in different decision-making contexts.

In closing, this research affirms that in the vibrant, challenging, and opportunity-rich Nigerian market, successful brand positioning is a deliberate and disciplined act of signaling. It requires brands to be ruthlessly clear about what they stand for, deeply authentic in how they embed themselves in the social fabric, and meticulously consistent in how they express themselves at every point of consumer contact. The triadic framework offers a roadmap for building such brands that are not just seen and heard, but clearly understood, genuinely trusted, and consistently chosen.

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