



Customer Involvement in Entrepreneurship Process in Nigeria: A Pathway to Innovation in New Ventures

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ARTICLE INFO

Article History

Received : 17.02.2025
Revised : 15.02.2025
Accepted : 30.03.2025

Article Type :
Research Article



ABSTRACT

Customer involvement in the entrepreneurial process is increasingly recognized as a critical driver of innovation in new ventures in Nigeria. This study examines the role of customer participation in shaping product and service innovation, with a particular focus on customer complaints and co-creation initiatives. Using a quantitative research approach, data were collected from 80 Nigerian entrepreneurs in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) through a structured questionnaire. Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to assess the relationship between customer complaint management, co-creation initiatives, and innovation performance. The results indicate no statistically significant relationship between customer complaint management and innovation ($r = -0.531$, $p = 0.643$) or between co-creation initiatives and innovation ($r = -0.132$, $p = 0.916$). These findings suggest that while customer engagement strategies enhance satisfaction and loyalty, they do not directly drive innovation outcomes in Nigerian start-ups. Weak correlations highlight a gap between customer feedback collection and its effective integration into the innovation process. The study recommends that businesses treat customer complaints as sources of innovation insights, adopt structured co-creation frameworks, and invest in digital transformation technologies such as artificial intelligence and big data analytics. Additionally, fostering a culture of employee-driven innovation can complement customer engagement efforts. Future research should explore the contextual challenges that hinder effective customer participation in innovation within the Nigerian entrepreneurial landscape. By addressing these barriers, businesses can better leverage customer involvement as a pathway to sustainable innovation and competitiveness in the market.

Keywords: Customer Involvement, Entrepreneurship Process, Innovation, New Venture

1. INTRODUCTION

Entrepreneurial success in Nigeria is increasingly driven by customer involvement in the development of products and services. In an era of rapid technological advancements and shifting consumer preferences, businesses are recognizing the importance of integrating customer feedback and engagement into their innovation processes (Ilesanmi, 2025). Nigerian entrepreneurs, particularly in sectors such as consumer goods are leveraging customer insights to create tailored solutions that address specific market needs (Olatunji et al., 2025). This participatory approach not only enhances product relevance but also fosters brand loyalty and market competitiveness (Nader et al., 2025).

Furthermore, customer co-creation strategies, including surveys, social media interactions, and prototype testing, have enabled businesses to refine their offerings and improve customer satisfaction (Kumar, 2025). The rise of digital platforms has further facilitated direct communication between entrepreneurs and consumers, allowing for real-time feedback and iterative product development (Oredo et al., 2025). However, despite these advantages, challenges such as limited financial resources, data management complexities, and inconsistent consumer engagement strategies still persist.

Research shows that customer participation is essential for product development and represents a critical element of co-creation (Sadighha et al., 2025) because businesses and consumers work together to create value.

Their research shows customers have evolved from being passive consumers of products to active contributors who shape business offerings through feedback and innovation. Von Hippel (Barrett & Dooley, 2025) demonstrates that "lead users" significantly contribute to innovation because they detect market requirements before companies can spot them, which shortens the timeframe of product development cycles.

In the Nigerian context, Williams (2025) indicate that small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) are now more frequently using customer insights to improve product relevance. According to their research firms that utilize digital platforms and surveys along with social media for customer interaction achieve better customer satisfaction and loyalty. Oyedokun & Ishola (2025) demonstrate that active customer participation in product development strengthens market competitiveness in the fintech and e-commerce industries because these sectors rely heavily on customization and user experience.

According to Marvel et al. (2025) customer participation generates innovative products but too much dependence on consumer feedback results in slower decision-making and higher product development costs. Companies need to find equilibrium between customer insights and managerial know-how to prevent product failures from conflicting consumer expectations. According to Edobor & Sambo-Magaji (2025) businesses face challenges because many customers lack the necessary technical knowledge to provide meaningful feedback which can result in misalignment with strategic business goals. Ahmad (2025) investigate the role of digital tools such as artificial intelligence and data analytics in improving customer involvement during product development. The research shows that companies applying big data and predictive analytics achieve improved understanding of consumer behavior which enables them to create more precise and successful product adjustments.

Although current research recognizes customer participation's importance for developing products and services, research gaps persist. Rambe (2025) along with Ibidunni et al. (2024) explore the universal advantages of customer participation and co-creation yet fail to apply these insights to the Nigerian entrepreneurial context. Nigeria's social-economic conditions combined with its cultural diversity and technological framework establish specific hurdles and possibilities which demand deeper investigation. Furthermore, Omowole et al. (2024) analyze the methods Nigerian SMEs use to implement customer insights for innovative practices. The research concentrates on successful cases but fails to examine the obstacles and constraints entrepreneurs encounter when implementing customer-driven product development. The lack of adequate financial resources alongside restricted technological adoption and erratic consumer engagement methods requires more research exploration. The current research gaps necessitate further examination of the practical challenges Nigerian entrepreneurs encounter when they seek to integrate customer participation into their product development processes.

The objectives of this study are twofold. First, it aims to examine the role of customer complaints in shaping product and service innovation among Nigerian new ventures. Second, it seeks to assess the impact of co-creation initiatives on the innovation process within these ventures.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Customer Involvement

Customer involvement involves businesses obtaining useful information from customer interactions which leads to greater innovation and customer satisfaction while providing a stronger competitive edge (Li et al., 2025). The extent of customer involvement indicates how much customers contribute to developing and delivering products and services while participating in their design. Customer involvement includes different modes of participation like giving feedback and co-creating solutions as well as testing prototypes and shaping business decisions (Perkis et al., 2025). In Busalim & Asadi (2025) view customer involvement represents a joint creation process between businesses and consumers who together create value through interactive experiences. Von Hippel (2005) identifies this approach as user-centered innovation because customers actively shape products through their shared preferences and needs. Munawaroh et al. (2024) describes customer involvement as a strategic approach that incorporates consumer insights into business decision-making to boost market competitiveness in new ventures. The research interprets customer involvement as the capacity of new ventures to respond to customer complaints while integrating customer co-creation initiatives and social media interactions to stimulate product and service innovations within the organization.

2.2. Customer Complaints

Customer complaints stand as essential elements of customer engagement which deliver businesses direct feedback about their improvement needs. Nwosu and Uchenna (2022) found that entrepreneurs receive direct knowledge about product flaws and service shortcomings through customer complaints which also show consumer discontent. Through systematic analysis of customer complaints businesses detect common problems which leads to refined offerings and improved customer satisfaction. Olatunji et al. (2025) state that customer complaints function as an informal feedback tool helping new companies stay flexible within competitive markets. Startups which address customer complaints experience enhancements in product quality and service delivery that result in increased brand loyalty. Similarly, Adegbite et al. According to Omowole et al. (2024), businesses that implement complaint management systems address customer dissatisfaction while simultaneously utilizing gathered insights for innovation. Felix (2015) explain that certain complaints cannot be acted upon because they originate from unrealistic expectations by consumers or misunderstandings about how to use products. Businesses should establish systematic methods for distinguishing constructive feedback from unnecessary complaints. The majority of researchers agree that customer complaints become a significant resource for ongoing enhancement and innovation when they are managed properly. Digital and service sector Nigerian startups now implement complaint management systems using social media platforms and chatbots as well as real-time customer support to build responsive and adaptive business models (Awodu, 2023).

2.3. Co-creation Initiatives

Co-creation initiatives mark an advanced stage of customer participation through joint business-customer efforts in product and service design and development. According to Beck (2025), customers function as active participants in innovation processes who create value instead of being passive consumers. Maier & Baccarella (2025) states that through co-creation businesses obtain valuable customer insights from "lead users" who often foresee market trends and whose contributions aid new product development. Omowole et al. (2024) assert that new ventures can use co-creation as a strategic resource to stand out within competitive markets. The research demonstrates Nigerian startups in technology and service industries implemented co-creation through customer participation in beta testing and the development of customized solutions by gathering ideas from the crowd. Similarly, Olatunji et al. (2025) demonstrate that businesses engaging customers in co-creation initiatives generate greater customer satisfaction because consumers develop ownership feelings towards the final product. Morkunas et al. (2025) maintain that companies face operational inefficiencies and strategic vision misalignment when they depend too heavily on customer-generated ideas. Additionally, Omowole et al. (2024) show how businesses face increased costs and longer development times because they find it difficult to manage and apply diverse customer suggestions. Through customer collaboration businesses achieve better alignment of their products and services with market demands which leads to improved customer satisfaction and competitive advantage (Felix, 2015).

2.4. Innovation

Business success hinges on innovation which proves especially essential for new ventures aiming to gain competitive advantages in dynamic marketplaces. Customer input plays a crucial role in driving innovation through the use of consumer insights during product and service development (Christodoulou et al., 2024). Otike & Kiszl (2024) observed that modern innovation processes become user-focused because customers actively contribute to new solution development through feedback and joint problem-solving efforts. Adegbite et al. The findings of Omowole et al. (2024) demonstrate that companies which include customers in their innovation procedures create products that better meet market demands. The research demonstrates the ways Nigerian startups across different sectors utilize customer engagement methods and platforms for co-creation while addressing customer complaints. Similarly, Olatunji et al. (2025) businesses that quickly adapt to consumer needs using iterative product development cycles achieve a competitive edge by anticipating industry trends.

Nwosu & Mathias (2022) highlight how digital technology facilitates innovation through customer involvement. Nigerian companies have increasingly adopted online surveys and customer analytics to collect insights that lead to innovative solutions. Based on user feedback Nigerian fintech companies like Flutterwave and Paystack improved their payment systems which resulted in smoother financial transactions. However, Adebayo et al. The research by Omowole et al. (2024) indicates that development costs escalate and innovative

processes extend because incorporating customer input demands extra research phases along with multiple testing stages and iterative improvements. The business community still agrees that customer involvement serves as a strong mechanism to stimulate innovation.

2.5. Customer Involvement and Entrepreneurship Process Innovation

Uno et al. (2025) investigated how customer relationship cessation and customer involvement affect new product development results in B2B markets. The research combined qualitative case studies and quantitative surveys to follow a mixed-methods approach. The researchers collected data from 250 firms in B2B markets across different industries and used regression analysis to study how customer relationship dynamics affect new product development results. The research showed customer relationship termination resulted in innovation process disruptions. The integration of customer knowledge into strategic innovation processes leads organizations to better results but removing customers suddenly from the process can damage product development.

Osorio (2025) studied the development process of innovative food products and packaging while highlighting how customer-focused strategies propel innovation. The study used a qualitative research design to analyze case studies from food and packaging companies which launched successful novel products. Industry experts provided data through interview sessions. Companies that incorporate customer input throughout their innovation stages experience greater market reception and successful product launches. The research demonstrated that packaging design which incorporates consumer insights improves user experience while boosting sustainability and brand loyalty.

Gunarathna & Chandrasekara (2025) examined how customer participation in new product development processes affected the biscuit manufacturing sector. The research utilized a mixed-methods approach combining qualitative and quantitative data collection techniques. Customer surveys collected data regarding product preferences and development engagement while product managers and R&D teams from biscuit companies participated in interviews. The study demonstrated that product innovation improves when companies integrate customer feedback since these organizations produce products which match market needs more effectively. The study demonstrated that customer involvement during the NPD process is critical to creating competitive and innovative products within the biscuit industry.

Anning-Dorson (2018) conducted research to examine how customer participation affects service business performance across Ghana and the UK. Empirical research shows that customer participation leads to product innovation which then mediates the connection between customer participation and company performance. Product development processes must incorporate customer integration to ensure products meet actual market requirements according to the conclusion.

Feng et al. (2016) studied the effects of customer participation on new product development costs as well as the speed and financial success of NPD initiatives. Their analysis of NPD processes revealed that financial performance benefits indirectly from customer involvement by reducing costs and speeding up development processes. The involvement of customers in NPD procedures results in more efficient innovation by streamlining development processes.

Munawaroh et al. (2024) stated that SMEs that maintain strong customer orientation exhibit higher innovation levels because they align more closely with market needs. New product market appeal improves when customer-derived knowledge is used during their development process which serves as a foundation for successful innovation. Research shows that when entrepreneurs include customers in their processes they achieve greater efficiency and more innovative products because they align their work with real market needs which ensures long-term success in diverse sectors including SMEs.

3. RESEARCH METHODS

This research uses a quantitative methodology to examine how customers affect entrepreneurial processes. This study utilized a descriptive survey research design. A total of 120 business owners from small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in various industries make up the study population. The study selects entrepreneurs who actively participate in developing products or services and managing marketing efforts and customer relationships. The study applied a stratified random sampling technique to achieve adequate

representation from entrepreneurs across multiple industries. The study establishes the correct sample size with Cochran's formula to maintain statistical adequacy and representative sampling. The final sample consists of 80 respondents. Researchers utilize a structured questionnaire as their main tool for gathering data. Participants provided their responses using a five-point Likert scale which spans from 1 indicating Strongly Disagree to 5 indicating Strongly Agree. The study utilizes Cronbach's alpha to evaluate reliability and considers any coefficient equal to or greater than 0.7 as acceptable. Researchers conducted analysis of the data through both descriptive and inferential statistical methods. The researchers employed descriptive statistics which included means and standard deviations to summarize the collected responses. The study applied Pearson correlation as an inferential statistical technique to investigate how customer involvement interacts with the entrepreneurial process. Researchers utilized SPSS version 26 to assist them with data analysis.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Data Analysis

Table 1. Response Distribution for Customer Complaint

Items	Strongly Disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Neutral (3)	Agree (4)	Strongly Agree (5)	Mean	Std. Dev
Timely response to complaints	12	18	15	22	13	3.12	1.32
Effectiveness of complaint resolution	10	21	11	25	15	3.22	1.34
Customer satisfaction after complaint handling	8	19	13	24	18	3.36	1.38

Source: SPSS, version 26, 2025

Customer Complaint Management analysis reveals that most respondents have a favorable perception. Customer feedback shows satisfaction with complaint management through mean scores between 3.12 and 3.36 yet indicates opportunities for better performance. Customer satisfaction following complaint resolution stands out as the best-rated aspect with an average score of 3.36. Customers report satisfaction when their complaints are resolved even though resolving complaints presents potential challenges. The variation in standard deviation values shows respondents have differing perceptions which indicates that complaint resolution practices demonstrate inconsistent levels of effectiveness.

Table 2. Response Distribution for Co-Creation Initiatives

Items	Strongly Disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Neutral (3)	Agree (4)	Strongly Agree (5)	Mean	Std. Dev
Customer involvement in product design	15	20	14	18	10	2.86	1.40
Collaboration in service development	18	19	11	16	13	2.86	1.50
Use of customer feedback for innovation	21	9	18	16	16	2.96	1.48

Source: SPSS, version 26, 2025

The mean scores for Co-Creation Initiatives fall between 2.86 and 2.96 which shows a slight deficit from neutral engagement levels for collaborative product or service creation. Customer feedback usage for innovation tasks recorded the peak average score of 2.96 among three evaluated items which demonstrates the recognition of customer involvement in innovation operations. The high standard deviation shows that participants have differing views on customer involvement because some people perceive it to be stronger than others do. The study shows that businesses must improve customer involvement in their product design and service development processes.

Table 3. Response Distribution for Innovation

Items	Strongly Disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Neutral (3)	Agree (4)	Strongly Agree (5)	Mean	Std. Dev
Introduction of new products/services	14	16	17	18	9	2.79	1.33
Adoption of new technologies	22	14	15	19	4	2.53	1.36
Encouragement of creative ideas from employees	20	12	19	17	6	2.63	1.38

Source: SPSS, version 26, 2025

In the area of Innovation the research displays below-average perceptions of innovative practices with mean scores between 2.53 and 2.79. The adoption of new technologies received the lowest rating with a mean score of 2.53. The survey results show that respondents believe technological advancements lack adequate funding. The poor results in this area demonstrate that organizations must make innovation their top priority by developing new products while also fostering employee creativity. Filling these identified gaps will enhance customer interaction and boost business effectiveness.

HO₁: There is know significant relationship between customer complaints and product and service innovation among Nigerian new ventures.

Table 4. Pearson Correlation Between Customer Complaint Management and Innovation

Variables	Pearson Correlation (r)	p-value	Interpretation
Customer Complaint Management	-0.531	0.643	Weak negative correlation, not significant

Source: SPSS, version 26, 2025

Customer Complaint Management displays a weak negative relationship with Innovation ($r = -0.531$) which lacks statistical significance ($p = 0.643$). The data indicates a weak relationship between customer complaint management changes and innovation.

HO₂: There is know significant relationship between co-creation initiatives and innovation process in Nigerian new ventures.

Table 5. Pearson Correlation Between Co-Creation Initiatives and Innovation

Variables	Pearson Correlation (r)	p-value	Interpretation
Co-Creation Initiatives	-0.132	0.916	Very weak negative correlation, not significant

Source: SPSS, version 26, 2025

The Co-Creation Initiatives and Innovation correlation is very weakly negative ($r = -0.132$) and not statistically significant ($p = 0.916$), meaning there is little to no linear relationship.

4.2. Discussions

The research shows no meaningful statistical connection between customer complaint management and innovation and no significant relationship between co-creation initiatives and innovation at the 95% confidence level. Enhanced customer engagement and complaint resolution processes do not automatically result in increased innovation outcomes. The main focus of customer complaint management is service recovery and enhancing customer satisfaction instead of driving innovation (Sadighha et al., 2025). Resolving customer complaints successfully builds trust and loyalty but fails to directly lead to the uptake of new technologies or innovative offerings according to Busalim & Asadi (2025). Moreover, Ilesanmi (2025) shows that companies tend to address complaints on an as-needed basis rather than employing them to drive innovative solutions through creative problem-solving. The current research shows a weak correlation between customer issue resolution and strategic innovation which suggests problem-solving does not naturally lead to innovative strategies.

Co-creation initiatives remain popular as innovation tools but frequently fall short of producing substantial breakthroughs. Research indicates that customer engagement in developing products or services frequently displays fragmentation and superficiality which results in negligible influence over innovation results Nader et al. (2025). The effectiveness of co-creation as an innovation driver remains limited when businesses collect customer feedback and neglect to incorporate valuable insights into their innovation

processes (Oredo et al., 2025). The standard deviations observed in co-creation initiatives show high variability that strengthens this argument by demonstrating the inconsistency of customer involvement perceptions among respondents.

Kumar (2025) reveal that businesses which conduct systematic analyses of customer complaints discover dissatisfaction patterns which lead to process improvements and innovative service delivery when addressed systematically. Organizations that incorporate customer complaints into their innovation processes develop solutions that better meet customer needs which results in gaining competitive advantages (Ibidunni et al., 2024b). Multiple authors highlight how customer involvement becomes a key innovation catalyst in technology-focused sectors according to Enkel et al. (2009). Apple and Tesla have demonstrated how customer feedback combined with collaborative processes can lead to improved product development and increased innovation. According to Ilesanmi (2025), well-defined frameworks are essential for converting customer insights into valuable innovations through co-creation initiatives. The study results indicate that the co-creation approach remains effective but suffers from flawed structured implementations.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Research results demonstrate that customer complaint management and co-creation activities show no statistically significant impact on innovation performance within Nigerian start-up companies. Weak and statistically insignificant correlations demonstrate that better customer complaint resolution and customer co-creation activities fail to produce guaranteed innovations. Customer satisfaction and loyalty might increase through effective complaint resolution but this practice does not lead directly to technology development or new product service innovation. Co-creation theoretically promotes innovation but achieves limited results because of uneven application and inadequate customer participation. The findings support previous research which states that for customer engagement in innovation to produce substantial results it needs to be planned and incorporated within strategic frameworks.

The recommendations derived from this study emphasize a strategic shift in how businesses, particularly Nigerian new ventures, respond to customer input and manage innovation. Rather than viewing customer complaints solely as triggers for service recovery, businesses should recognize them as valuable sources of innovation. By analyzing patterns in customer complaints, firms can uncover opportunities for improving products and services, thus enriching their innovation strategies. Leveraging AI-powered sentiment analysis tools can further enhance this process by providing actionable insights from customer feedback.

To optimize the benefits of co-creation, businesses should develop structured frameworks that enable meaningful customer involvement in product and service development. This includes forming innovation panels with engaged customers, building digital platforms for real-time feedback, and offering incentives for high-value contributions. Without a clear structure, co-creation may fail to generate impactful innovation. Moreover, the current low adoption rate of emerging technologies indicates a need for increased investment in digital transformation. Technologies such as artificial intelligence, big data analytics, and blockchain can significantly enhance service delivery and help companies develop customer-centric solutions.

Additionally, the research identifies an underutilization of employee-generated ideas in innovation processes. Organizations are encouraged to foster a culture of innovation by creating internal platforms for idea sharing, forming cross-functional innovation teams, and implementing reward systems to motivate employee participation. Finally, future research should explore the long-term effects of sustained customer complaint management and co-creation on innovation outcomes. Longitudinal studies and industry-specific analyses could provide deeper insights into how these practices influence innovation across diverse business environments.

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