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Mobile Telephony Underlings? Women Airtime Hawking in South-South Nigeria

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Abstract

The Nigerian telecommunication sector operates a patriarchy. Women constitute less than 20 percent of the regulatory authority's staff and own less than 25 percent of telecom clients' equity. This study investigates a surprising dimension that makes women the most visible operators at the subaltern end of the telecom distribution chain but accords them the slightest recognition as industry contributors. The operating conditions and income profile of 497 women airtime sellers in the south-south region of Nigeria are investigated. Findings show that most of the respondents are women of 20 years of age or less, with secondary education, and unmarried. The majority make \$1.50 a day and will never make airtime hawking their career unless they receive support. A regression analysis of the predisposing factors and their engagement in the business shows that they sell airtime primarily because it requires little or no formal sales technique. They also hawk airtime because they were not gainfully employed and since it requires a little startup capital. These findings are helpful for researchers and multilateral agencies, especially the United Nations, which needs data for the Sustainable Development Goal (5) to achieve gender equality and empower women and girls.

Keywords: Women, Mobile telephony, airtime, southern Nigeria, feminism, SDG 5.

Introduction

Mobile telephony is the chief driver of Nigeria's Information and Communication Technology (ICT) sector, which contributes 8.5 percent to the country's nominal GDP of \$510 billion as of 2013. According to the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS, 2019), the contribution has increased to 10 percent, forming the core of the \$1.2 trillion GDP in purchasing power parity. The country currently has 170 million mobile lines, with 150 connected to service the population of about 200 million. According to the nation's National Communication Commission (2019) report, these lines are shared by four networks, with MTN from South Africa having 55 million, Airtel from India at 26 million, and 9Mobile (formerly) Etisalat having 10 million. Glo Mobile, the only locally-owned network, has 40 million lines. Each of the four clients had grown its subscriber base by at least 10 percent as of 2022.

Mobile devices represent an extraordinary and unmatched shift in how Nigerians use the media (Friedrich et al., 2009). In addition to the improved service provision, made manifest in speed, cost, and quality of communication (Bedi, 1999; Norton, 1992), the contributions of mobile

telecom to Nigeria's economy are strikingly significant in the area of employment. The sector is noted for its massive employment generation while providing the livelihood for several thousands of Nigerians. However, the socio-economic shaping of these opportunities, especially if gender is added to the matrix, elicits an unusual character that calls for an investigation.

Core feminists are of the view that women are under-represented in ICT. It would not make any difference whether it is a developed or an emerging economy, and this view is visible in literature (Griffiths *et al.*, 2007a, 2007b). One primary reason for this disparity in ICT access favoring the male gender in Africa and Nigeria is the disparities in education and training opportunities skewed against women (Igbino et al, 2019; Hafkin & Taggart, 2001; Gurumurthy, 2003). This trend will continue in the future ((Karenza Moore, Marie Griffiths, Helen Richardson & Alison Adam, 2008). The liberal feminists hold the futuristic view that women stand a better chance of occupying a more prominent space as ICTs expand (European Commission, 2004; Faulkner, 2001; Turkle, 1995; Wajcman, 2004; Rainer, Laosethakul, & Astone, 2003). However, it may

take some time to reverse the current subjugation of women in the sector.

Women's visibility in Nigeria's mobile telephony can be explained in the primary and secondary value chain elements, which encompass technology creation and manufacture, policy and decision, procurement and ownership, and distribution (Yartey et al., 2021; Ikpefan et al., 2019). How these integrate is crucial to the survival of mobile telephony in the country. The reason is that technology is never an indistinct phenomenon but an agglomeration of multifaceted systems that must be in a continuum to make it consequential (Sein and Harindranath, 2004).

The creation and manufacturing aspect is domiciled in and dominated by the advanced countries of Europe and America, with intense competition coming from Asian countries, including China, Japan, and South Korea. Women's visibility is low in design and manufacture, and this low visibility is replicated at the level of those who make decisions and formulate policies. The low visibility is also seen in ICT ownership and procurement. At the same time, the under-representation of women in the context of connectivity and adoption is widely known and exemplified by both the core and liberal technofeminist assertions, as stated earlier.

However, the marketing and distribution component of the mobile telephony continuum in Nigeria presents a research problem that challenges the feminist submission about the under-representation of women in the ICT subsector and calls for an investigation. This study examines the unusual preponderance of women as the subalterns at the bottom of the ICT distribution chain in Nigeria and their rating in the country's telecom industry. This work is a follow-up to similar studies conducted in the southwest (Omojola *et al.*, 2021) of the country

Mobile Telecommunications Sector of Nigeria and Preliminary investigation on Women Airtime Hawkers in Nigeria

The Nigerian mobile telephony service comprises two major radio-based systems, namely the Code Division Multiple Access (CDMA) and the Global System for Mobiles (GSM), the type operated by America's AT&T and T-Mobile Networks. Each is a hotchpotch of technologies created from different sources and agglomerated for mobile communications.

The CDMA (Code-division multiple access) systems run by Visaphone, Intercellular, and Reltel (similar to Verizon and Sprint in the United States) came in initially but

have now been disabled owing to a poor subscriber base. The global system for mobile communication (GSM) has several subscriber-friendly features, including its alignment with endpoint equipment such as mobile phones and computer software. As listed earlier, Nigeria has four GSM carriers, namely the South African Mobile Telecommunication Network of Nigeria (MTN) and Bharti Airtel of India. The other two are 9 Mobile (formerly Etisalat Mobile company of United Arab Emirates) and the locally owned Glo Mobile Network Limited. The mobile outlet of Nigeria's former national carrier – MTEL- is either moribund or dead and not visible as the fifth carrier.

Mobile telephony technology might be a cluster of multifaceted and interdependent systems, but the distribution component of the continuum stands out as the main driver of the industry. Mobile phone technology is a socially-constructed phenomenon whose cycle is influenced not just by those who create and adopt the technology but also, more importantly, by those who distribute it. The distributors constitute the superintendents in the marketplace where the adopters and the technology deployers meet to generate the vitality that makes the industry succeed.

The composition of the significant part of the distribution chain reflects the techno-feminist submission of under-representation and minoritization, similar to what obtains in the ownership, policy, and decision-making domains. None of the networks has ever had any woman as its chief executive officer since the beginning of the mobile telephone revolution in 1999. According to *Bloomberg Businessweek* (2014 <http://investing.businessweek.com/research/stocks/private/board.>), MTN Nigeria has 16 board members, out of which not more than three are women. The company's equity structure is such that the present situation will continue for a long time. *Bloomberg Businessweek* (2014) also reports that of the six board members of Airtel, none is a woman. A similar situation in Glomobile and 9 Mobile completes the scale.

The distribution system of the four networks follows the same or similar pattern. As its leading airtime distributors, a network has a select group of few 'trade partners' who remit millions of dollars' sales proceeds from network-generate personal identification numbers (PINs) to the network periodically. These partners distribute to sub-dealers who can either make them available to the customers through the internet or electronic platforms of the banks or print the PINS on paper and resell them to sub-distributors. After the sub-distributors, news breaks.

The techno-feminist submission of women's minimization in ICT, which aptly applies at the dealer, sub-dealer, and sub-distributor levels, becomes fragile as street hawkers or retailers become an instant majority at the subaltern end of the distribution chain. The female hawkers do not enjoy the comparative advantage of bulk sales by dealers, sub-dealers, and distributors. Therefore, each hawker must sell substantially to make up some profit. This majoritarian-minoritization transposition, which tests the techno-feminists' assertion of female under-representation, also informed the implementation of this investigation. The factors that predispose them to be the telephone

airtime distribution subalternate elements were explored.

In Port Harcourt, the dual-role capital of Nigeria's oil industry and Rivers State, there is a preponderance of women airtime hawkers. This outlook is similar to that of other major cities in the country's southern parts (Omojola *et al.*, 2021). This observation elicited the conjecture that females dominate airtime retail in Rivers State and the other five remaining states of the south-south subregion of Nigeria, namely Akwa Ibom, Edo, Delta, Cross River, and Bayelsa. Table 1 shows the results of the systematic sampling survey conducted to determine the male-female proportion of airtime hawking.

Table 1: Male-female proportion of airtime street hawkers in south-south Nigeria

States	M	F	N	Universe
Akwa Ibom	4	90	94	3,920,208
Bayelsa	3	50	53	1,703,358
Cross River	7	67	74	2,888,966
Edo	4	81	85	3,218,332
Delta	7	97	104	4,098,391
Rivers	4	112	116	5,185,400
Total	29	497	526	17,796,323
%	5.8	94.2	100	

Table 1 affirms the conjecture and corroborates what appears obtained in southwest geopolitical zone (Omojola *et al.*, 2021). It is rare to see men selling airtime on the streets in these regions. It is not clear if this situation obtains in the northern parts of the

country, where women are often confined to homes for religious reasons.

Seven women airtime hawkers, selected purposively, were also engaged in a discussion. They claimed the ability to speak on their

business, including the conditions that predisposed them to hawking airtime on the streets. The focus group discussion, which lasted 56 minutes and 16 seconds, was designed to produce insight into how the women operate and sustain their trade. Transcripts of the discussion helped in setting the agenda for this study. The women aged 26 and 64 spoke in the Nigerian pidgin English, a dialect that combines a simple form of the English language and cultural phrases to bridge the communication gap between different ethnic groups (Folayan et al., 2018). The summary of the discussion, which takes after a similar study in southwest Nigeria, is as follows (Omojola et al., 2021):

1. Profits from airtime hawking are meager.
2. Airtime hawking is not attractive to the internal revenue service and local government authorities.
3. Little startup capital, as low as three dollars, is all one needs to start the business.
4. Unemployment and family problems can make people sell airtime on the streets.
5. You can only make airtime a career if traders earn as much as the captains of the business earn.
6. The government is insensitive to the plight of

airtime workers and is only interested in people that pay considerable taxes.

7. No job interviews or certificate is required to start the business.
8. The business allows a higher degree of freedom to operate, unlike in an office setting.

These opinions help to signpost the direction of the research. They were articulated to form the main objective of the study.

Objective and Significance of the Study

This work investigates the factors that influence the engagement of the female folks in airtime retailing at the bottom end of the telecom distribution chain. This work is essential in some respects:

- It exposes the factors that predispose airtime street hawkers to work as subalterns of the telecoms sector in south-south Nigeria. The work appreciably adds to the literature and allays the impression of invisible scholarship held by researchers and scholars, including Castells et al. (2007, p.4), who assert that: “We know a good deal about Norway because of the quality of Norwegian research in this field, while we know little about

Nigeria because of the scant reliable evidence on this important country.”

- The possibility exists that government, telecom/ICT administrators, and multilateral institutions, including the International Telecommunications Union (ITU), will consider the findings of this work a great asset as input into policy formulation. The United Nations are among the agencies seeking information to drive the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) 6 to equalize women’s rights with men and make girls useful to themselves and society.
- The study provides some insight into the role of women in Nigeria’s ICT sector.
- One major characteristic of these techno-subalterns is that they operate in the informal sector. This study, therefore, creates a new trajectory for studies in the informal sector of the economy.

Theoretical Anchor

When compared to men, women are in low-paying jobs (Okon et al., 2018; Omojola & Morah, 2014; Kim, 2000, p.1; Luce & Weinbaum, 2008, p. 21), meaning that they cannot support themselves and a few dependents from their earnings. These societal

dynamics are typical in emerging economies compared to the advanced ones. The possibility exists that in an African or South Asian country, there are more women than men who work as cleaners in hospitals where more men than women work as doctors and surgeons. Radical feminists assert that men and women must be equal politically, socially, and economically (Goodfriend, 2014; 1992, p.115). Amazonian feminists physicalize their perspective, saying they are opposed to gender role stereotypes and discrimination against women based on the assumptions that women are supposed to be, look, or behave as if they are passive, weak, and physically helpless. Delphy & Leonard (1980) reject the idea that specific characteristics or interests are inherently masculine (or feminine) and uphold and explore a vision of heroic womanhood.

Techno-feminists also argue along the line of under-representation exacerbated by socio-political, economic, cultural, and educational considerations (Mitter, 2007; Greenfield et al., 2003; Millar and Jagger, 2002; MacKenzie and Wajcman, 1999; McQuillan and Bradley, 1999; Plant, 1997; Menzies, 1996; Henwood, 1993; Morris-Suzuki, 1988). Their focus is on technology creation and deployment,

policy and decision-making, adoption, and connectivity differential. Literature is also visible on ICT women hawkers and vendors in Africa (Jiyane and Mostert, 2010; 2008; Olatokun, 2007; Fors & Moreno, 2002, Hossaine & Beresford, 2012). However, the role of women in ICT distribution in Nigeria is not well established. This gap motivated this investigation.

The women majority working as subalterns in the Nigerian telecom industry makes fragile the epistemology of techno-feminism that thrives on the minoritization of the female folks. In the first place, women are not underrepresented as they dominate men almost in the ratio of 9-1, as Table 1 shows. The minoritization-majoritarian transposition noticed at the low level of the distribution chain calls for a probe.

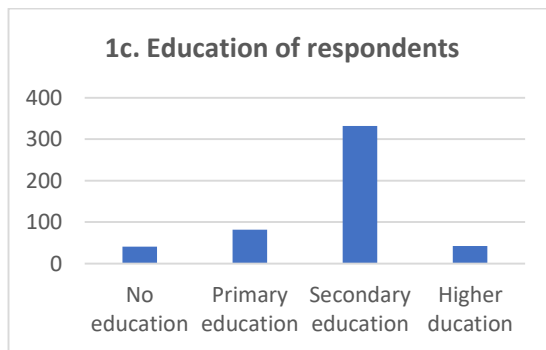
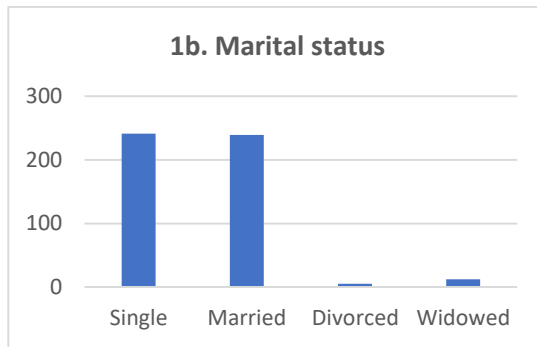
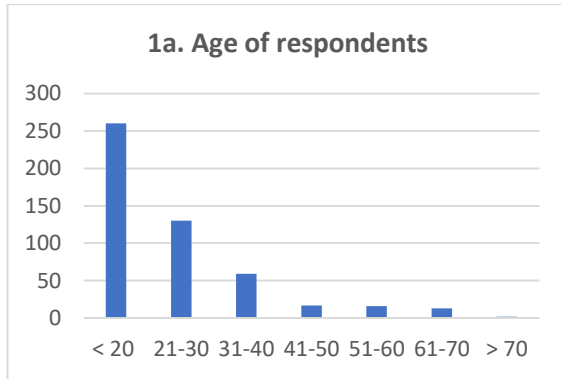
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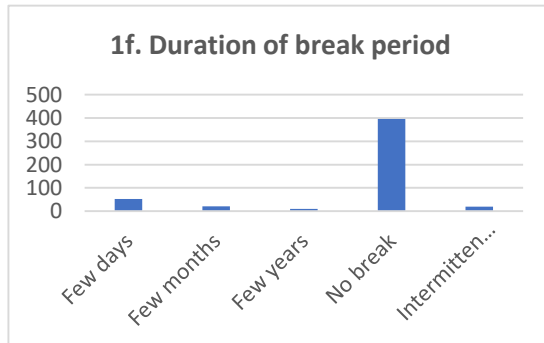
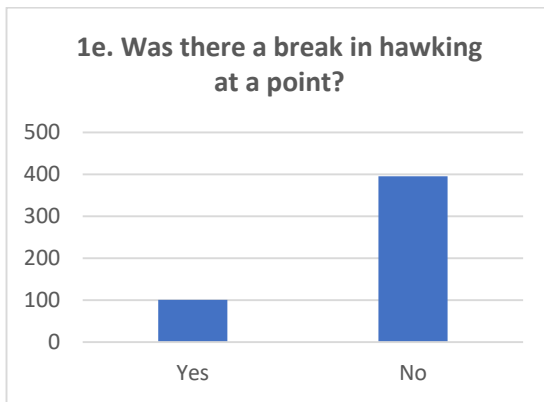
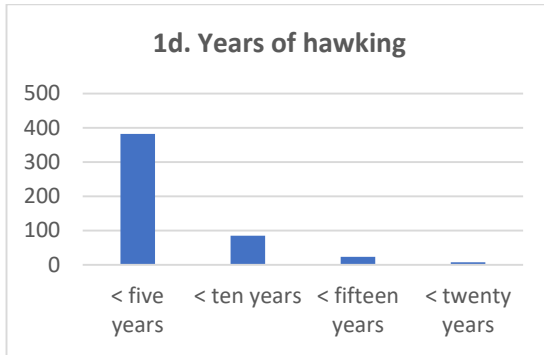
The survey design was adopted for the study. The questionnaire was used to gather data from the population of hawkers (497) already highlighted in Table 1. The survey zeroed in only on those women whose main occupation was hawking recharge cards. It is easy to identify them on street corners, road junctions, religious gatherings,

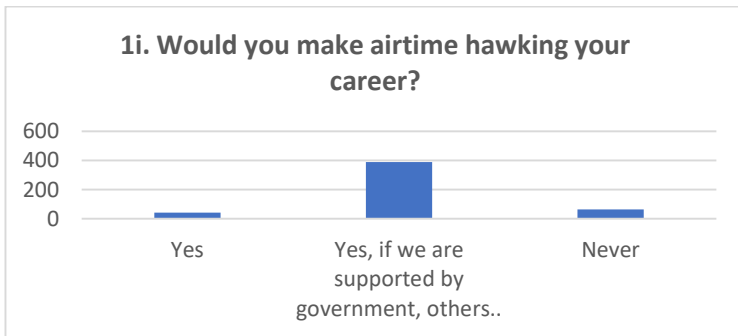
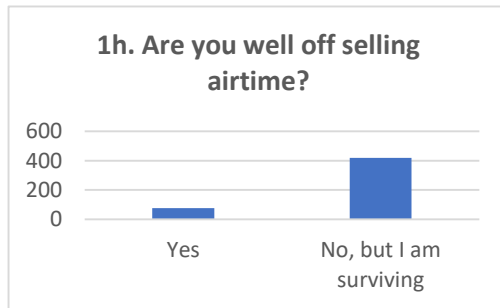
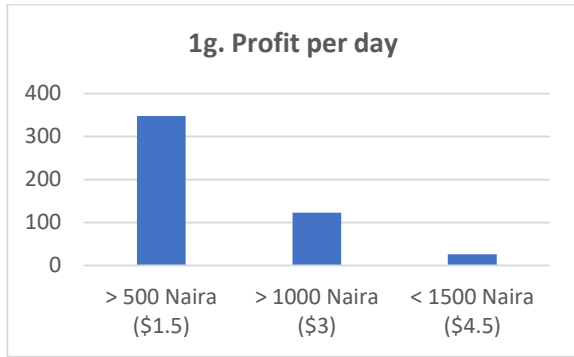
bus stops, and so forth. They were asked to indicate proof in the questionnaire that the hawking of airtime is their primary occupation. The questionnaire items are few and limited to their demographic attributes and those ten factors predisposing them to hawk on the streets. Rather than ask the respondents to list those factors, they indicated in the list those factors that applied to them. This approach facilitated the 'wait and collect' strategy the researchers adopted to retrieve all copies of the questionnaire. The wait and collect approach is becoming popular among researchers in West Africa. It is part of the effort to minimize or eliminate the case of unreturned copies of the questionnaire.

Survey Results

A frequency or percentage distribution of the study variables is necessary to give the results a general outlook. While this distribution is generally unreliable in measuring how a variable truly counts, especially in terms of its relationship with another, it helps to visualize, prima facie, the magnitude of the number of observations. The frequencies are visualized below as bar charts in Figure 1a -1i







In translating the frequencies on the charts to percentages, it is noteworthy that a substantial portion of the hawkers can be considered educated, as 66.8 percent have secondary school education. More remarkable is that women between 50 and 70 still hawk

airtime on the streets! Particularly impressive is 0.4 percent- of the total 497 who are 70 years and above. It is not surprising that the majority of hawkers are younger people. A significant 3.4 percent of these

respondents are either widowed or divorced.

In comparison, 1.4 percent have sold airtime for 20 years, meaning that their business is as old as the mobile telephony business, which started with GSM in 1999. A whopping 79.7 percent say they did not take a

break at a point selling airtime, while the breaks experienced by some who claimed otherwise were intermittent. The majority said they were not well off in the business – almost the same majority – 78.5 percent – who said they could make a career out of it if only they received support or were encouraged.

Table 2: Frequency distribution of the factors that predispose women to airtime hawking in South-south Nigeria

	Airtime hawking predisposing factors	Yes (in %)	No (in %)
1	I hawk airtime because it generates a quick and steady profit	27.4	72.6
2	I hawk airtime because it carries little or no risk	86.5	13.5
3	I hawk airtime because it has little or no entry formalities	82.3	17.7
4	I hawk airtime because it requires little or no sales technique	31.2	68.8
5	I hawk airtime because it requires little or affordable initial capital to start the business	84.3	15.7
6	I hawk airtime because I was not gainfully employed	84.7	15.3
7	I hawk airtime because there is no law or ethics restricting airtime selling	26.4	73.6
8	I hawk airtime because there is no disturbance or demand for dues by local govt (council) officials	82.3	17.7
9	I hawk airtime because of financial pressures from family	41.9	58.1
10	I hawk airtime because of the desire for self-fulfillment	29.2	70.8

Five of the factors in Table 2 have preponderant yeses. These are where the business carries little or no risk, has little or no entry formalities and requires little or affordable initial capital to start the business. The others are where there is no disturbance from local government officials and because laws and ethics that guide the business do not exist or are not visible. The

remaining five have more nos than yeses. They are the desire for self-fulfillment, no law, and ethics for the business, hawking owing to financial pressures. Others are that the business requires no sales technique and hawking because the business generates steady and quick profit. The descriptive Table 4 below gives a more in-depth insight into these variables.

Table 3: The Descriptive of the Variables

S/ N	Variable (N=625 in all cases)	Min	Mid Point	Max	Mean	SD
1	Age of airtime hawkers	1.00	4.0	7.00	1.9	1.2560
2	Marital status of airtime hawkers	1.00	2.5	4.00	1.6	.6406
3	Educational status of airtime hawkers	1.00	2.5	4.00	2.8	.7213
4	Years spent hawking airtime	1.00	2.5	4.00	1.3	.6246
5	Was there a break hawking airtime?	1.00	1.5	2.00	1.8	.4028
6	Duration of break period as airtime hawker	1.00	3.0	5.00	3.6	1.0129
7	Average profit per day hawking airtime	1.00	2.0	3.00	1.4	.5774
8a	I hawk airtime because it generates quick and steady profit.	1.00	1.5	2.00	1.7	.4462
b	I hawk airtime because it carries little or no risk	1.00	1.5	2.00	1.1	.3418
c	I hawk airtime because it has little or no entry formalities	1.00	1.5	2.00	1.1	.3821
d	I hawk airtime because it requires little or no sales technique	1.00	1.5	2.00	1.7	.4637
e	I hawk airtime because it requires little or affordable initial capital to start the business	1.00	1.5	2.00	1.2	.3641
f	I hawk airtime because I was not gainfully employed	1.00	1.5	2.00	1.2	.3602
g	I hawk airtime because there is no law or ethics restricting airtime selling	1.00	1.5	2.00	1.7	.4410
h	I hawk airtime because there is no disturbance or demand for dues by council officials	1.00	1.5	2.00	1.2	.3821
i	I hawk airtime because of financial pressures from family	1.00	1.5	2.00	1.6	.4938
j	I hawk airtime because of the desire for self-fulfillment	1.00	1.5	2.00	1.7	.4550
k	Are you well off as an airtime hawker?	1.00	1.5	2.00	1.8	.3622
l	Would you make airtime hawking your career?	1.00	2.0	3.00	2.0	.4621

In Table 3, The standard deviation measure shows that data spread out significantly from the mean for most of the variables except *educational status* and *duration of break period as airtime hawker* marked in reverse colors (serial numbers 3 and 6), which clustered most around the mean. In the case of the predisposing factors, *I hawk airtime because it carries little or no risk*, and *I hawk airtime because it has little or no entry formalities* spread out most among the ten factors. Table 3 gives insight into the strength of the individual variable and its concomitant number of observations but does say little or nothing about the

relationship of one variable to another, without which the core objective of this work cannot be achieved.

This challenge has necessitated the computation of the linear regression values to determine how independent variables pan out with one another and collectively with the dependent variable. The multivariate distribution offers a reliable way to determine how each of the ten predictor variables impacts the airtime hawking criterion. A logical step here will be to know the model that emerges overall from the regression analysis.

Table 4: model summary of linear regression analysis

R	R²	Adjusted R²	Std. Error of the Estimate
.189 ^a	.036	.016	1.77886

Table 4 shows a positive, albeit low correlation (R) of .189 between women's airtime hawking (criterion) and the level predicted by the ten independent or predictor variables. The R² value .036 squares up R and indicates the proportion of the variance in women's airtime hawking accounted for by the ten predictors. Essentially, this is a measure of how good a prediction of women's airtime hawking is made with the knowledge of the predictor variables. It appears, however, that R² tends to overrate the

success of this model from the perspective of ecological validity (that is when applied to the real world).

Many statistics software treat this issue by computing an adjusted R² – taking into cognizance the number of variables in the model and the number of observations the model is based upon. This resulting value of .016 means that this model accounts for 16 percent of the variance in women's airtime hawking, meaning that the model is unimpressive. This

situation is demonstrated in the analysis of variance (ANOVA) in Table 6 below. The table shows the overall significance of the model.

With the significant level set at 95 percent, an insignificant model emerges here at .058 as shown in the report ($F_{10, 486} = 1.803, p > 0.05$)

Table 5: The analysis of variance (ANOVA), showing how significant the model is

Model (1)	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Regression	57.053	10	5.705	1.803	.058
Residual	1537.873	486	3.164		
Total	1594.926	496			

Table 5 has shown collectively that the ten predictors do not predict airtime hawking by women in south-south Nigeria. This omnibus presentation does not mean that all predictors do not predict the criterion variable. A breakdown of this

prediction will be necessary to tell how much each predictor has predicted the criterion variable. Table 6 below displays some values, including the standardized *Beta* coefficients, which measure the contribution of each of the ten predictors.

Table 6: Beta coefficients, t, and significance values of 10 predictors

	Predictors	Beta	t	p
1	I hawk airtime because it generates quick and steady profit.	-.001	-.023	.982
2	I hawk airtime because it carries little or no risk	.007	.147	.883
3	I hawk airtime because it has little or no entry formalities	-.015	-.326	.744

4	I hawk airtime because it requires little or no sales technique	.130	2.858	.004
5	I hawk airtime because it requires little or affordable initial capital to start the business	.055	1.222	.222
6	I hawk airtime because I was not gainfully employed	.083	1.832	.068
7	I hawk airtime because there is no law or ethics restricting airtime selling	-.005	-.100	.920
8	I hawk airtime because there is no disturbance or demand for dues by local government (council) officials	-.014	-.317	.751
9	I hawk airtime because of financial pressures from family	.075	1.670	.096
10	I hawk airtime because of the desire for self-fulfillment	-.013	-.290	.772

The *t* and significance values in Table 6 give a rough estimate of the impact of each predictor variable on the criterion variable. However, the Beta coefficients are the critical measure needed in this work to achieve the set objective, which is to determine the factors that predispose women to sell airtime in south-south Nigeria and the strength of those

factors. The more the contribution of the factor, the more significant the effect on the criterion variable. Table 6 is redrawn as Table 7 to present the predictors in the order of their contribution to the criterion variable. The rearrangement enables the determination of the strongest and weakest predictors.

Table 8: Ordered Beta coefficients, *t*, and significance values of 10 predictors

	Predictors	Beta	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
1	I hawk airtime because it requires little or no sales technique	.130	2.858	.004
2	I hawk airtime because I was not gainfully employed	.083	1.832	.068
3	I hawk airtime because of financial pressures from family	.075	1.670	.096
4	I hawk airtime because it requires little or affordable initial capital to start the business	.055	1.222	.222
5	I hawk airtime because of the desire for self-fulfillment	-.013	-.290	.772
6	I hawk airtime because there is no disturbance or demand for dues by local government (council) officials	-.014	-.317	.751
7	I hawk airtime because it has little or no entry formalities	-.015	-.326	.744
8	I hawk airtime because it carries little or no risk	.007	.147	.883
9	I hawk airtime because it generates quick and steady profit.	-.001	-.023	.982
10	I hawk airtime because there is no law or ethics restricting airtime selling	-.005	-.100	.920

According to Table 8, “I hawk airtime because it requires little or no sales technique” contributes most to the women’s

engagement as airtime hawkers in south-south Nigeria. The following two predictors have some semblance of significance – “I hawk airtime because I was not gainfully employed” and “I hawk airtime because of financial pressures from family.”

All other predictors are non-performers, with the predictor “I hawk airtime because of financial pressures from family” being the worst non-performer. This predictor-showing has some ramifications to it.

Discussion

Niger Delta is another name for south-south Nigeria, and it is the area where about 80 percent of Nigeria’s crude oil is produced. Incidentally, the region is a classic case of the oil curse, and the region’s citizens have one of the highest poverty indexes in southern Nigeria.

The primary reason for this unfortunate situation is the over-reliance on oil and the non-diversification of its economy, resulting in the high unemployment rate of uneducated people. The characteristic of this situation is low education, which revolves mainly around secondary education. The data gathered on the respondents’ education aptly typifies this situation as a whopping 91.5 percent

are those with secondary, primary, and no education. At the same time, the remaining 8.5 percent represents the respondents with high education.

Moreover, no fewer than 265,000 children in Bayelsa State were out of school, while teenage pregnancies are commonplace in the state (Sahara Reporters, 2019). Though not as critical, this situation is replicated in more educationally developed states like Edo, Ondo Rivers, Cross River, and Akwa Ibom and States.

Concomitant with this poor education record is citizens’ lack of skills for gainful employment in nearly all areas except probably in violent agitation against environmental degradation and militarized demand for more allocation to them from the oil proceeds by the infamous Niger Delta militants. The lack of education and skills offers a fertile ground, especially for women to engage in trades and businesses that, according to them, require fewer skills and techniques. One of the upshots of this poverty situation is pressure on the family, a sequel to the inability to fulfill the standard family obligations such as feeding, shelter, paying school fees, and the like.

The story has always been of development failures because of

corruption (Omojola, 2011) attributed to all parties to the conflict in the Niger Delta – government (local, state, and federal), oil companies, and oil communities. Therefore, airtime hawking on the streets offers an attraction to exit these challenges, especially for the subaltern elements of society.

However, it is gladdening to note that government and policymakers seem to have realized that it is dangerous to have in the majority an army of unemployed persons. This development is why several interventions have been put in place not only by the government but also by organizations and multilateral agencies to alleviate the suffering and improve the citizens' socio-economic conditions. The visible interventionist programs were implemented by the Presidential Task Force, The Niger Delta Development Board, the Niger Delta Development Commission, and Oil Mineral Producing Area Development Commission. The focus areas of these bodies include skill acquisition and education. While men form the majority of these interventions' beneficiaries, women have also been visible recipients.

These three most substantial contributors also have theoretical ramifications. They appear to bear

some similarity with the reasons women are under-represented in technology. Women are denied access to the lucrative domains of mobile telephony because they do not have the requisite education, technological skills, and the engineering capability to function there. This simply means that they are not gainfully employed in this subsector.

The challenges become more problematic, especially for those women with family responsibilities. These negative dynamics are potent enough to drive them to those occupations and engagements that are less demanding in these prerequisites, one of which is airtime hawking. However, there is a caveat. Techno-feminists have argued the prevalence of these predisposing factors from the point of underrepresentation. However, these factors relate to the over-representation of women in the marketing and distribution sector of the mobile telephony industry!

Conclusion

One striking observation regarding the interventionist programs is that the telecom companies are not visible. Where visible, it is often for the wrong reasons, including the unwholesome portrayal of women

in advertisements (Nwabuikwu, 2017).

While the proof exists to show that some social responsibility activities of these companies target women outside the telecommunication sector, evidence of direct assistance to women actively engaged in the mobile telephony, such as the respondents in this work, is either non-existent or invisible. For instance, MTN has a record of encouraging female professionals in the mobile telephony sector by sponsoring awards ceremonies and female distributors with an eye on payback.

However, the women in the subaltern segment of the industry are hardly recognized. MTN Nigeria recently assisted police officers' wives (Ekwujuru, 2018). It is not clear if this is a way of securing guarantees from the Nigeria Police, whom the company relies on heavily to assist in protecting and securing its assets in Nigeria.

Proof exists to show that the lack of seriousness of some foreign firms in engaging women in a more pleasant manner is a carryover from their home country. An MTN (2018) press release quoted the South African Communications Minister's remark about how "woefully low" women's participation in the ICT

sector in South Africa, MTN's country of origin. This low participation, the release referred to as a *fact*, is lower than the United Nations' figure of less than 30 percent globally.

Moreover, women are not receiving the support or encouragement needed in the sector. This is the same situation as captured by respondents' answers to the item that asked if they would like to make airtime hawking their career. A whopping 78.5 percent only want it as a career if they receive support from the government or telecommunications companies. Others said never!

It is on this note that the following recommendations are made:

- Telecommunication companies in Nigeria should wake up to the responsibility of relating to the women in the subaltern segment of the industry using the factors that predispose women to hawking airtime and the strength those factors exert on this criterion variable.
- The government should organize these women into a formidable entity within the telecom industry and formulate policies that

make them relevant in the industry.

- If the government fails to do this, the Nigerian Labor Congress or its relevant affiliate can perform this task and constitute them into a pressure group and, on their behalf, ask the government and telecom clients to live up to their responsibility concerning the women.

Suggestions for Further Studies

One area of concern is that the respondents' hawking business is threatened by banks and a few other platforms that distribute airtime online. This situation was also observed in other country regions (Omojola et al., 2021).

This alternative mode of airtime procurement has attracted millions of phone users who prefer to recharge their line from the comfort of their room rather than go to the streets where these women are to buy. Researchers should study how this impacts the hawking business and its socio-economic ramifications.

Furthermore, the techno-feminists' assertions that link the underrepresentation of women to the poor socio-economic dynamics are not in line with the findings of this study

that link the same dynamics to overrepresentation as seen in the subaltern segment of the telecommunication industry. This calls for an investigation into the techno-feminist theory to update it.

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