

FACTORS INFLUENCING BRAND PREFERENCE OF CONSUMERS IN INDIAN MOBILE TELECOMMUNICATIONS SERVICES

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Abstract: This research paper aims to analyze the factors influencing brand preference of consumers in context of Indian mobile telecommunication industry. Brand Preference signifies preference that consumers have over other brands under basic assumption of brand availability and price equality. Brand Preference plays an important role in telecommunication sector as this sector in India is growing at a rapid rate and competition is getting tough every day. Questionnaire was floated to gather responses for attitude of consumers towards their brand preference in Indian mobile telecommunication industry. The questionnaire was in English language and was floated to students and working professional in Information technology industry. After getting a total of 280 responses, data was analyzed in SPSS and exploratory factor analysis was used to understand brand preference of consumers in Indian mobile telecommunication Industry. EFA identified four important factors namely brand awareness, service value attributes, customer value attributes and consumers attribute. Service value attributes turned out to be most important factor in influencing brand preference of consumers. This study will help the market players to improve their strategy so that more consumers prefer their brand over their competitors.

Keyword: Brand Preference, Mobile service providers, Indian Telecommunication sector, Exploratory Factor Analysis

Introduction

Brands cannot be downloaded. Strictly speaking brands do not exist. (Debbie Millman, 2011). Still there are millions of description about brands in various books because they can shape customers perception towards company and make a difference between sale and no sale. A brand is nothing but an idea, a reputation that a company carry with them. Most marketers believe that they have good idea of what their competitors are doing but the Framework define to measure their competitor's actions is either very narrow or very broad. (Eric Greifenberger, 2009). Discussions on brand knowledge, service spending, brand association and brand equity has been done by various authorities like (Keller, 2003), (Kepferer, 2008) and (Aaker, 1996) and still not many authors give importance to brand preference in order to make decisions

about brand strategy. On the other hand, (Nelson, 2000) believed that brand preference plays a pivotal role in brand management. Brand preference is not given much importance in dynamic market specifically in the telecommunication industry as more Emphasis is put on brand reality.

Consumers have their preferences in accordance with their perceptions towards the brand which lead them to decide what products or services they want to avail. Successful branding strategies help consumers to be aware of the brand presence which in turn increase the possibility of buying the company's products and services. Brands today take care of every minute aspect of customer requirements and their perceptions to show themselves resembling to customer needs and emerge as a winner over their competitors which is done by acquiring new customers, retaining old customers by giving them best of their services and standing on their promise.

Indian telecommunication sector is more than a century old and numerous changes have been brought into this sector to improve the quality of service and meet the growing needs of Indian telecommunication network. Globalization has also helped this sector to become an integral part of the infrastructure of the Indian economy. In terms of the growing number of wireless subscribers, India is second only behind China which brings the need to study this sector and the factors that affect brand preference of consumers. (Sakthivelan.M,2014). Indian telecommunication market has witnessed interest of mobile service providers from other countries as well. Because of the increased competition, companies has to maintain service quality at reduced tariff. Findings from this study revealed that consumers perception of service quality have direct impact on their behavior. (Jhamb.D, 2020).

Service providers in Indian telecommunication industry are Tata Teleservices Ltd, Reliance JIO Infocomm Limited, Reliance Telecom Limited, Vodafone Idea Ltd., Bharat Sanchar Nigam Ltd., Bharti Airtel Limited and Aircel Limited. This sector has a total subscriber base of 1777.02 million as of January 2020 out of which 56.31% reside in urban areas. Indian Government has increased their expenditure in telecom infrastructure by six times to Rs 60000 crore in 2014-2019. Reliance JIO captures 34% of the total market share which is followed by 28.4% of Bharti Airtel Limited. Vodafone-Idea captures 27.6% of market share and BSNL has 10.4% of total subscriber base.

This

study believes that brand preference precedes brand equality¹. In highly competitive industry like mobile telecommunication market and in other growing market places like Asia Pacific regions. In these markets, Brand loyalty maybe evasive, but brand preference plays a significant role in customer buying behavior. Regardless of the industry, most companies in the world today invest in brand management as a way to increase their presence and portray what they stand for. It is a way to win customers and help customers to see resemblance between themselves and the organization. Branding is seen as a promise for customers to get the best product and services. Today in the world of quickly changing customer needs, branding plays an essential role in the success of a business. Companies that have their products in brand preference stage are in a better position as compared to their competitors as their brand preference leads to brand loyalty which in turns reaps profit for a longer period of time.

Brand preference is impacted by various types of attributes and these attributes relate to service providers, service value, brand awareness and consumer attributes and this study aims to understand how is consumer's influenced by each of these attributes. Each of these attributes are further made up by various factors. Provider attributes are made up of brand personality, the way their employees behave and interact with end user and the country of origin of the service provider. Similarly, impact of advertising by brands, word of mouth and publicity together determined the effect of brand awareness on brand preference of consumers. With the support from previous researches, it was known that price and quality together make the service value attribute. Lastly, consumer attributes are formed by cumulative effect of consumer's satisfaction, perceived risk and the reference group. All these factors build the various attributes which are correlated to brand preference

This research paper is divided into 5 parts. First deals covers the theoretical background which includes the theories on Branding and Brand preference, based on which this research paper is carried out. Next part shows an overview of empirical studies from the literature. Twenty five research papers were studied before carrying this research. All these research papers were studied thoroughly and the methods used for research, ways to obtain data (online and offline questionnaire), theories used and demographics were observed and the best practices have been incorporated in this paper to get the best results. Next part of the paper talks about the data collection part which is done through online questionnaire and the methodology used to carry out the research is Spearman correlation method. Fourth part of the paper reveals the results after conducting analysis from the collected data and the relationship between independent and dependent variables. Last part of the paper is about the conclusions from the study, research gap, future scope of the study and recommendations are offered.

Theoretical background

As already mentioned in the introduction there is no one definition of brand preferences which is accepted by all authorities. Also there is a lack of consensus on the factors that influence brand preference. This research has collected perception of various contributors on brand strategy and branding in addition to the factors that influence brand preference.

In this study we have tried to establish a relation between brand preference and other variables related to branding activities. (*Chang and Ming, 2009*) are of the view that brand preference is impacted by Brand equity and the loyalty of brand, whereas (*Keller, 2003*) believed that brand preference is an antecedent of brand equity and brand loyalty. Many others use both terms brand loyalty and brand preference interchangeability. Brand preference is one strong indicator that defines how strong the brand is in the market. In other terms brand preference reflect a desire of customer to stick to a company's services and products even though there are other alternatives available for same price.

(*Mitchell and Amioku, 1985*) in their paper concluded that brand preference is impacted by a range of attributes which change customer perception to favor one brand over the other. (*Jamal and Good, 2001*) in their research also examined various factors to study the impact on the preference of brand in mind of customers.

Attribute of consumers, attribute of products and market attributes are studied and supported by various other studies to develop a relationship between preference of brand and many other branding variables like (*Chang and Ming, 2009*) brand equity, (*Hellier et al., 2003*) repurchase intention and (*Escalas Bettmen, 2003*) reference group. (*Grace and O'Cass', 2005*) in his study of antecedents of Brand verdict explored range of variables to include in his study. He suggested that brand attitude which is influenced by customer satisfaction, brand evidence and brand hearsay have a direct impact on brand verdict. Name of brand, value for money and employees falls under category of brand evidence whereas controlled and uncontrolled communication are under brand hearsay category. (*Berry, 2000*) encapsulates the relationship between brand awareness, brand equity and the meaning that a brand carry. He also stated that brand meaning impacts the experience of consumer. (*Segal Horn, 2003*) offered more complex study on different stages in the branding process and their interrelationship with other factors like communication, relationships and overall brand image. All these theories helped to build a framework to conduct this research in a more efficient way where many factors are taken from their studies to observe their relationship on consumer's brand preference in Indian Telecommunication industry.

Literature Review

Several authorities have defined brand recognition, brand image and

customer characteristics as significant antecedents of consumer brand preference (Keller, 2008); Grace and (O'Cass, 2005). The general succession is seen when brand recognition, brand image and customer attributes are viewed as post preference constructs. In this sense, Brand recognition is a potential consumer's ability to identify the brand member of a particular group of goods or services. Brand image is perceptions of a brand as expressed as brand associations in consumer memory. (Keller, 2008). Customer attributes are loosely defined as the consumer's characteristics. There is no clear relationship between the brand preference and four constructs associated with it.

The proposed model regarding the factors of brand preference were introduced in this paper on the basis of previous research and theory that further suggests relationship variables and their effect on brand preference of consumers. This section summarizes the reasoning behind the design of conceptual framework. To give the section more theoretical structure, the possible factors identified from various studied are discussed at length. As per literature (Kepferer, 2008) the companies must frame relationship between emotional and functional benefits of customers to succeed in in today's dynamic marketplace. All these clustered labels help to build the relationship in positive direction, (Hellier et al., 2013). These clustered labels helps the organizations to cross the chasm between organization and consumers. Perceived risk, reference group and customer satisfaction are the constituents, (Hellier et al., 2013); (Kapferer, 2008) of consumer attributes. Various variable and attributes are used as a medium to create brand preference and not to foster sales directly. With the facility of number portability, telecom service providers have reduced switching cost and the competition is intensified. (Izogo, E.E. 2016).

Through reviewing studies of various authors, certain variables has been identified as significant in impacting brand preference of consumers. Provider attributes plays an important role in affecting brand preference of consumers. It includes personality of brand, Reputation of brand, their country of a region and the attitude of employees. The study reveals that employees work related attitude has significant positive effect on the organizational commitment, their job satisfaction and their career satisfaction. (Noorliza Karia 2019). As per study conducted by (Rajagopal, 2006), brand personality is an important factor that determines brand preference of consumers. Many other authors like (Batra et al., 2013); (Freling and Forbes, 2005) are of the view that brand personality determine the emotional relationship between brand and their consumers. Empirical studies done by (Mulyanegara and Tsarenko, 2009) described in their research that there is a strong correlation between brand preference and brand personality. Service location also plays a critical role for determining brand preference of consumer. Research done by the (Yoon et al., 2009) suggests that service brand should be

developed keeping service location as a critical factor as convenience is directly related to the location of service. As there is a direct communication between employees and the customers therefore attitude and behavior of employees have a direct impact on the customer's perception towards the brand. Customers today have tendency to associate brand with their country of origin and they tend to like or dislike that particular brand by their country of origin (Keller, 2008).

Brand awareness is influenced by a variety of factors including advertising, publicity and word of mouth. It has been interpreted by other studies that organizations should try to control their uncontrolled communication to make good impression in mind of customers towards their brand. (Simon and Sullivan, 2013). Celebrity endorsement have no correlation with the reputation of telecommunication companies but their attractiveness and trustworthiness have a positive correlation with the reputation which in turn impact the brand preference of consumers. (Zakari, M. and Asante, C. 2019). Word of mouth publicity and Advertising are important factors in building preference of brand in Minds of consumers. (Grace and O'Cass, 2005). The models proposed by (Grace and O'Cass's, 2005) suggest that the most relevant promotional activity to increase brand preference is advertising. As per (Florack and Scarabis, 2006), reduction in consumption apprehension can also be achieved through advertising. It definitely informs customers with brand existence and the direction of advertisement (positive or negative) impacts the consumer behavior towards that particular brand. As per (Mangold et al., 2009), advertising is not a reliable source of providing information whereas word-of-mouth and unpaid publicity directly leads to brand preference as the uncontrolled communication is more trusted by the customers.

Model developed by (Barry, 2010) give special place to word of mouth because when people talk to each other about a brand it is more trusted credible and looked an unbiased opinion. Another factor that greatly influence brand preference of customer is publicity by (Grace and O'Cass, 2005) that is because it has the ability to Trigger brand response in customers (Voyer, 2000). As per (Zakari, M. and Asante, C. 2019), customer attitude and preferences are strongly influenced by good media coverage.

Service value attributes and provider value attributes together forms the image of a brand which refers to how consumer perceive a company's service or a product. Service value attribute majorly consists of the quality and prices of service. Various studies (Vahid Pezeshki, Alireza Mousavi, Susan Grant, 2009); (Keller, 2008) suggests that price has direct effect on the choice of service that customer make. If a customer perceives a brand value to be on the higher end, they are generally willing to pay more for that service (Erdem et al., 2004). Therefore it can be implied that organizations should structure their price based on

the perception of quality in the consumer's mind which further suggest that if the quality of service is not good as compared to the price, the customer will have negative influence towards the perception of brand. Reasonable pricing strategy can help to overcome this problem. As per previous researches technical quality and functional quality are the two main factors reflected on overall service quality in Indian mobile telecommunication industry.

3.

Consumer attributes is observed to have direct impact on the brand preference. Customer satisfaction, customer reference group and customer perceived risk are three important customer attributes. If a customer is not happy with the product or service, they will not continue to use it. As per the research, (*Ingy Shafei, 2016*), customer satisfaction is influenced more by the core services provided by the telecommunication service providers. As per research (*Hellier et al. 2003*), customer satisfaction acts as an antecedent to brand preference. Many authors like (*Hellier et al., 2003*); (*O' Cass and Grace, 2004*) have already discussed the relationship between the preference of brand and the customer satisfaction. (*Hellier et al, 2003*) believes that experience from the service impacts customer satisfaction which in turn influences brand preference and if a customer is satisfied with using the brand he will continue to use it increasing his brand loyalty. As per research by (*Mieres et al., 2006*). Perceived risk has negative correlation with brand purchasing decisions. Previous studies have suggested that if the perceived risk of a brand is high, then the brand preference of consumers is low (*Mieres et al., 2006*). Perceived risk is assumed high in service industries like mobile telecommunication industry. Also intangibility of service add on to the perceived risk of buying it (*Bharadwaj et al., 2003*).

Research Gap

This research is conducted on Indian telecommunication industry. Previous studies in this sector has been carried out by considering price sensitivity, service quality, customer satisfaction, reference group of customers and value added services as the major factors to understand the brand preference of consumers. This research has taken comprehensive list of variables namely brand personality, employee attitude, country of origin of service provider, advertising, word of mouth, price, quality, customer satisfaction, perceived risk and reference group to understand brand preference of consumers in Indian telecommunication sector. Also this study clubs the variable into different factors to have clear understanding about the brand preference of consumers.

Objective of study

Objective of this research is to analyze the factors influencing brand preference of consumers in Indian mobile telecommunications services

Data and Methodology

Questionnaire Design

This research is conducted on quantitative data as it requires analysis of large customer base and is therefore best suited in this scenario. Primary Data is collected by floating an online questionnaire to 300 respondents and responses from 280 student and IT professionals were collected. Pilot test is run on 50 respondents and then the questionnaire is floated to obtain the responses. First section of questionnaire clearly elaborates the purpose of this research which is followed by gathering information on variables like Brand personality, Employee attitude, Country of origin, Advertising, Word of mouth, publicity, price, quality, satisfaction, perceived risk and reference groups. Most of the questions were directed towards understanding the attitude of consumers towards their preference of brand. The language of questionnaire is very simple to avoid any misunderstanding in the interpretation of questions.

Sampling

Convenience sampling method was used to collect data for this research. This method is easy to use and it allowed to obtain basic data from randomized people which helps to reduce any biasness from the data. Also collecting data using this method is relatively fast and inexpensive as compared to other sampling techniques.

Research Instrument

Likert scale is used as an instrument to measure responses against the research questions. 5 point scale is used, where 1 being the factor least affecting the brand preference and 5 being the factor most affecting the brand preference. Using this instrument helps to quantify the data easily. Also it is easy to draw inferences and produce results using this instrument. The collected data was then analyzed using SPSS software.

Conceptual Framework

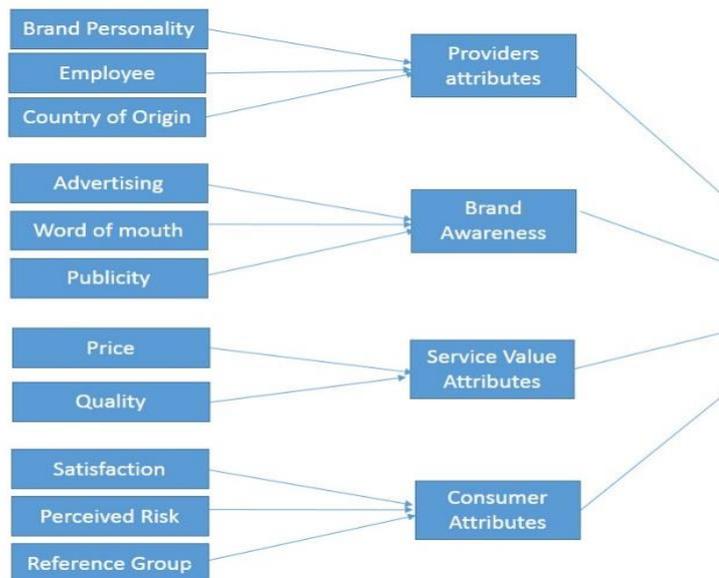


Fig.1: Conceptual Framework for conducting research
 Table 1: Constructs and Indicators Factors affecting Brand Preference

| Construct | Authors | Indicators |
|---------------------------|-------------------------------------|---|
| Provider Value Attributes | Aaker, O’Cass and Grace | Impact of Brand Personality on brand preference on consumers. |
| | | Impact of company employees on brand preference on consumers |
| | | Impact of origin country of brand on brand preference. |
| Brand Awareness | Bansal and Voyer, Grace and O’Cass | Impact of advertising on brand preference. |
| | | Impact of Word of mouth on brand preference. |
| | | Impact of Publicity on brand preference. |
| Service Value Attributes | Lassar and Lim et al | Price Paid to avail the service. |
| | | Quality of the service availed |
| Consumer Attributes | Hellier, Mieres and Park and Lessig | Impact of Customer Satisfaction on brand preference. |
| | | Impact of perceived risk on altering brand preference. |
| | | Impact of Reference Groups on brand preference. |

Source: <https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/10610421111166621/full/html#idm45657867531248>

Findings

For doing analysis on the collected data of 280 respondents, exploratory factor analysis, statistical technique is used. It helps to reduce the data to a smaller set of summary variables and also helps to explore the theoretical structure. It is useful for identifying the relationship between the respondent and the variables.

| | |
|------|------|
| df | .000 |
| Sig. | |

Source: From Primary Data

Table 2: KMO and Bartlett’s Test

| | |
|--|----------|
| Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy. | .801 |
| Bartlett's Test of Sphericity | 1428.756 |
| Approx. Chi-Square | 89 |

All variables that had Variable loading of less 0.5 were removed from the SPSS output of Exploratory Factor Analysis and Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy exhibits a value of 0.801 which is acceptable and the Bartlett's Test of Sphericity is also acceptable. Also the significance level is less than 0.05, which allows us to take data into consideration. These four factors are then taken into consideration for making any implications from the research.

Table 3: Exploratory Factor Analysis

| Construct | Factor 1 | Factor 2 | Factor 3 | Factor 4 |
|--------------------------|----------|----------|----------|----------|
| Service Value Attributes | 0.872 | | | |
| | 0.862 | | | |
| Consumer Attributes | | 0.862 | | |
| | | 0.81 | | |
| | | 0.803 | | |
| Brand Awareness | | | 0.922 | |
| | | | 0.81 | |
| | | | 0.685 | |
| Providers Attributes | | | | 0.847 |
| | | | | 0.771 |
| | | | | 0.761 |

Source: From Primary Data

Total Variance Explained

| Component | Initial Eigenvalues | | | Extraction Sums of Squared Loadings | | |
|-----------|---------------------|---------------|--------------|-------------------------------------|---------------|--------------|
| | Total | % of Variance | Cumulative % | Total | % of Variance | Cumulative % |
| 1 | 3.997 | 24.432 | 24.432 | 3.997 | 24.432 | 24.432 |
| 2 | 2.413 | 17.143 | 41.574 | 2.413 | 17.143 | 41.574 |
| 3 | 1.757 | 15.975 | 57.550 | 1.757 | 15.975 | 57.550 |
| 4 | 1.350 | 12.272 | 69.822 | 1.350 | 12.272 | 69.822 |
| 5 | .710 | 6.452 | 76.275 | | | |
| 6 | .665 | 6.044 | 82.318 | | | |
| 7 | .575 | 5.225 | 87.543 | | | |
| 8 | .454 | 4.132 | 91.675 | | | |
| 9 | .379 | 3.449 | 95.123 | | | |
| 10 | .318 | 2.893 | 98.016 | | | |
| 11 | .218 | 1.984 | 100.000 | | | |

Source: From Primary Data

Reliability Statistics

| Factor | Cronbach's Alpha | N of Items |
|---------------------------|------------------|------------|
| Service Value attributes | .832 | 3 |
| Consumer attributes | .764 | 3 |
| Brand Awareness | .778 | 3 |
| Provider Value attributes | .735 | 2 |

Source: From Primary Data

Factor 1 (Service Value attributes):

This factor Eigen value points out to be 3.99 and it explains 24% of the variance. The attributes related to this factor group are pricing of the service provided and the quality of the service and since they are directly related to the service therefore this factor is named as service value attributes. This factor influence the most of the consumers to change their brand preference therefore service providers must maintain a balance between the price and service quality of the service. Cronbach's Alpha value of 0.832 justifies that data collected from two questions regarding pricing of the service provided and the quality of the service can be clubbed under one factor. The finding from this study are in accordance with the

literature review where it studied that service value attributes is the most important factor in determining consumer's brand preference.

Factor 2 (Consumer attributes):

This factors Eigan value point out to be 2.41 and it explains 17% of the variance. The attributes related to this factor group are customer satisfaction, perceived risk of choosing a brand and the reference group of a consumer. Since these attributes relate to the consumer side therefore this factor group is named as consumer attributes. After conducting the analysis consumer attributes was found to the second most critical group in influencing consumers brand preference and customer satisfaction plays important role in it. Cronbach's Alpha value of 0.764 justifies that data collected from three

questions regarding customer satisfaction, perceived risk of choosing a brand and the reference group of a consumer can be clubbed under one factor. The finding from this study are in accordance with the literature review where it studied that consumer attribute plays an important role in influencing brand preference of consumers.

Factor 3: (Brand Awareness):

This factor's Eigen value point out to be 1.75 and it explains 15.9 % of the variance. The attributes related to this factor group are advertising, word of mouth and publicity which are the controlled means of communication. Since these attributes directly impact the awareness of a brand in consumers mind, this factor group is named as brand awareness and it plays a significant role in determining brands preference of consumers. Word of mouth affects the brand preference of consumers the most among other indicators of this factor group. Cronbach's Alpha value of 0.778 justifies that data collected from three questions regarding employees of advertising, word of mouth and publicity can be clubbed under one factor. The finding from this study are in accordance with the literature review where various authors identifies brand awareness as one of the factor influencing brand preference of consumers.

Factor 4: (Provider Value attributes):

This factor is resulted as the least critical factor in influencing brand preference of consumers. It has an Eigen value of 1.35 and it explains 12% of the variance. The attributes related to this factor group are employees of company, origin of country of the brand and the brand personality. Since these attributes are directly related to the service provider, therefore this factor group has been named as provider value attributes. Cronbach's Alpha value of 0.735 justifies that data collected from three questions regarding employees of company, origin of country of the brand and the brand personality can be clubbed under one factor.

Conclusions and recommendations

This research developed a conceptual framework of the factors influencing brand preference of consumers in the Indian mobile telecommunication industry. Factor analysis identified 11 variables namely brand personality, employee attitude, country of origin of service provider, advertising, word of mouth, price, quality, customer satisfaction, perceived risk and reference group which were grouped into four factors namely brand awareness, service value attributes, provider value attributes and consumer attributes. All factors influence brand preference of consumers to some extent. The factor that influenced brand preference the most are service value attributes which includes price and quality of the service provided, which is then followed by consumer value attributes.

This research will add value to the existing brand strategies. It will not only tell us about the role of controlled communication in increasing brand preference, but also emphasize on uncontrolled communication in the form of word of mouth and publicity. It is also very important for the brand to stand upon its promise which plays a major role in influencing brand preference of consumers. Various variables such as quality of service and price directly affects brand preference.

Future Scope

The scope of this study was limited to a specific sector in a specific country as it was conducted on telecommunication sector in India. Also responses could not be collected through offline questionnaire because of the COVID-19 outbreak and research has to be done with limited responses.

This research methodology can be replicated to other related sectors. Broadening the scope will help to explore the effect of antecedents of brand preference. It can also help to discover new factors that influence preference of brand in consumers mind. Analyzing demographic and psychographic factors can provide more details about consumers brand preference. Using techniques different to that has been used in this research can also result to two different perspectives and help to explore the relationship between factors that affect brand preference of consumers in Indian telecommunication industry.

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