

Quality Service Initiatives and Customer Retention of Four-Star Hotels in Port Harcourt

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the requirements of quality service initiatives and customer retention of four-star hotels in Port Harcourt, Nigeria. The study adopted descriptive research design to establish a relationship between quality service initiatives and customer retention. Both primary and secondary methods of data collection were used to obtain relevant data for analysis. The instrument of data collection employed was the questionnaire. The study population comprised of The population of the study consists of four (4) star hotels in Port Harcourt. The study focused attention on officers with job titles such as hotel managers, operations managers, heads of departments, unit heads and duty managers or supervisor as respondents for the study hence a total of fifteen (15) respondents per four-star hotel, giving a total of sixty (60) respondents as sample for this study. The data was analyzed using the Spearman Rank Order Correlation Coefficient statistic through the aid of statistical packages for social science version 23.0. The result of the findings revealed the existence of significant and positive relationship between quality service initiatives and customer retention of four-star hotels in Port Harcourt. The researchers conclude that quality service initiatives affect customer retention of four-star hotels in Port Harcourt and therefore recommended that management of four-star hotels in Port Harcourt should pay attention to quality service initiatives and other factors which may lead to customer retention..

Key Words: *Quality Service Initiatives, Customer Retention, Empathy, Responsiveness, Tangibility*

INTRODUCTION

Organizations over the years have regarded service quality as a strategic tool for positioning as well as a means of achieving operational efficiency and improving business performance (Tan, Oriande, & Fallon, 2014). Service quality dimensions have been seen as critical for the success of organisations because of their close link with customer satisfaction (Tan, Oriande, & Fallon, 2014) and more so in the service industry. Several empirical studies (Nimako, Gyamfi, Mumuni, & Wandaogou, 2013; Uddin & Akhter, 2012; Agbor, 2015) indicate that quality service initiative is the antecedent of customer satisfaction, has direct and indirect effects on behavioural intentions, and positively influences customer satisfaction. Subsequently, companies are increasingly striving to deliver high service quality to gain competitive advantage.

Service quality has a significant effect on customers' perception of brand image due to the statistics that show that a strong brand image is needed to distinguish an organization's brand and products from competitors' brands or products (Bolton & Drew, 2021). Schiffman and Kanuk (2019) also stated that customers will perceive brands that match and suit their images. As a result, service quality adds value to customers by helping them differentiate the brand from competing brands. This means that customers' perception of service quality is associated with brand image, and customers are more likely to purchase the brand that provides superior service quality.

According to Mathews (2018), the main difficulty facing most industries is the ability to continue satisfying their customers while at the same time making huge profits. In the past decade, the global hotel industry has experienced significant changes in terms of growth, competition, technology, and consumer needs. Competition puts pressure on many hotel service providers to provide quality services (Mathews, 2018). Hotels prioritise meeting changing customer preferences and needs, as well as increasing sales and cultivating repeat purchase behaviour. In a market like this, where there is a lot of competition and consumer needs are always changing, it is important for hotels to constantly compare how customers see the quality of their service to what they expect in order to meet and satisfy their needs.

Customers' expectations and preferences are increasing from time to time (Ayele, 2012). Service quality and customer satisfaction have increasingly been identified as key factors in the battle for competitive differentiation to gain customer retention and customer loyalty (Hersh, 2017; Kadampully & Suhartanto, 2019; Su, 2014). Along these lines, it is important for hotels to come up with their own unique ways to meet the needs of their customers while at the same time making profits.

Study Variables/Conceptual Framework

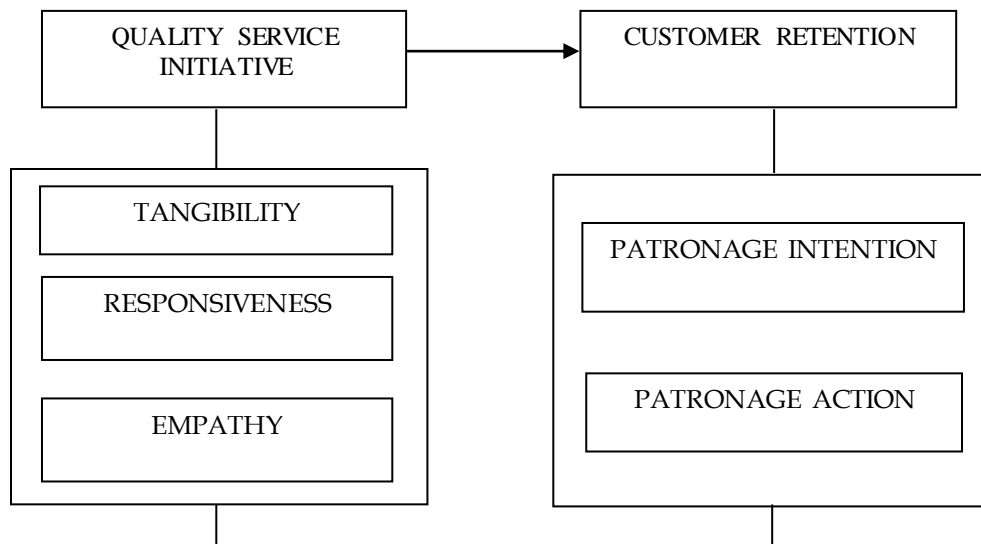


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework of Quality Service Initiative and Customer Retention of Four-Star Hotels in Port Harcourt

Source: Desk Researcher, 2023

LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT

This chapter portrays a review of the theoretical, conceptual and empirical literature on the relationship between quality service initiative and customer retention. The chapter will explore the theoretical formulization, conceptual framework, empirical review and knowledge gaps.

Concept of Quality Customers' Service

Quality is the lifeblood of service delivery firms, bringing increased customer retention, competitive advantage and long-term profitability (Naidoo, 2014). According to Grönroosin 1982, services are non-stoppable interactions that involve both customer and service providers. These services may be considered as superior non-touchable services but do require tangible resources and any valuable instruments that will facilitate the process of solving problems for customers. Zeithaml and Bitner (2013) defined service quality as the process where customers conduct a comparative analysis of the entire services being provided. While Sureshchandar, Rajendran & Anantharaman (2012) stated that service delivery organizations can gain a successful competitive edge over competitors through good service quality. However, a good administration that focuses on well trained staff, valuable program offering and its influence on customers, are also components of quality dimensions (Naidoo, 2014). Top management deems it necessary to invest time, energy, required training and resources to keep their staff sensitive and customer centric (Khan & Fasih, 2014; Naidoo, 2014)

Service quality is considered an important tool for a firm struggling to differentiate itself from its competitors (Lubbe, Douglas, & Zambellis, 2011). For the purpose of this study service quality will be based on the definition by Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry in 1990 who define service quality as the result of comparison that customers make between their expectations about a

service and their perception of the way the service was performed. It offers a competitive advantage to companies that strive to improve and hence bring customer satisfaction. Service quality has received a great deal of attention from both academicians and practitioners and service marketing literature has defined it as the overall assessment of a service by the customer (Fodness & Murray, 2017).

Ganguli and Roy (2016) defined service quality as an evaluation with a predominant cognitive aspect that emerges as a result of the comparison of the service (perceived service) quality that a consumer receives with the services quality shaped according to the expectations of consumer before the purchase. Abd-El-Salam, Shawky and El-Nahas (2013) opined that services quality is the result of the comparison made by customers about what they feel services firms should offer and perceptions of the performance of firms providing the services. According to Berry, Wall and Carbone (2016) through service quality, organization can reach a higher level of customer satisfaction and can maintain a constant competitive advantage.

In 1988, Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry had conducted an empirical study to measure the service quality towards the customers' perceptions by using the ten dimensions as a basic structure. The results indicated that some variables in these ten dimensions were overlapped with each other. In the ten elements of service quality, tangibility, reliability and responsiveness remain constant while the remaining seven determinants were categorized into the last two dimensions which are assurance and empathy.

As a result, there are five service quality dimensions in the modified version of SERVQUAL model that affect customers' satisfaction and thus brand image: Tangibility is related to the physical environment, facilities and the employees' appearance. Reliability is the ability to carry out the services consistently and accurately. Responsiveness is the willingness of the employees in helping the customer to solve the problem. Assurance is the adequate knowledge that the employees possess and the ability of the employees in entrusting the confidence. Empathy is associated with the organization provide the caring and individualized attention to their customers. Buttle in 1996 mentioned that SERVQUAL model is been used widely in measuring customers' perceptions towards various types of services.

Dimensions of Quality Customers' Service

One of the widely used models to measure the service quality is the model developed by Parasuraman et al, in 1988. The model consists of five different dimensions of services namely, Tangibility, Reliability, Responsiveness, Assurance and Empathy. The model runs by finding the gap scores between expectation and perception of the customers to a given service encounter. In this study the researcher will adopt three elements of this model as dimensions for this study.

Tangibility

Tangibility refers to the appearance of physical factors such as equipment, facilities used by a service company as well as to the appearance of service employees. Aspects in the tangible factor are for example has up-to-date equipment, physical facilities are visually appealing and materials are visually appearing. Tangibles relate to the physical cues that are a component part the service delivery process (Zeithaml et al, 2000; O'Neill & Palmer, 2003). If the customers are comfortable with company's employees, this indicates that customers will return to do further business with the company.

Empathy

An early, highly rigorous definition of empathy was that it is to perceive the internal frame of reference of another with accuracy and with the emotional meanings which pertain thereto as if

one were the person, but without ever losing the ‘as if’ condition. Another definition included viewing empathy as entering the private perceptual world of the other, being sensitive, moment to moment, to the changing felt meanings which flow in this other person and communicating one sensing’s of his/her world (Rahhal, 2015). The empathic understanding subscale of the Barrett-Lennard 1962 Relationship Inventory provided an operational definition of empathy. A shortened version of Barrett-Lennard’s 1964 revised empathic understanding subscale has been found to be related to both self-esteem (Ayele, 2012) and relationship satisfaction (Chu & Choi, 2011), suggesting that this subscale may be a measure of this construct. In this study, this concept is called perceived empathy, as it is an index of the extent to which a person perceives they are understood by another.

Responsiveness

Responsiveness refers to the willingness of the company to help its customers in providing them with a good, quality and fast service. This is also a very important dimension, because every customer feels more valued if they get the best possible quality in the service. It also means that the employees of a service organization are ready to help customers and respond to their demand as well as to notify customers when service will provide, and then give quick service. If a service fails to occur, the ability to recover quickly and professionally can generate very positive perceptions of quality (Hernon & Nitecki, 2009).

Concept of Customer Retention

The theoretical framework on customer retention strategies was put forward by Reichheld in 1996. In proposing the framework, Reichheld’s thoughts are based on the fact that loyal employees and investors who share a similar dream of longer relationships will be able to grow a crop of loyal customers for the firm. In attracting new customers, he urged firms to be conscious of the diverse “loyal coefficient” which is the sum of economic forces required to switch customers from one provider to another. The easiest customer to win is likely to be the quickest to leave. In his own words, Reichheld commented, “The customers who glide into your arms for a minimal price are the same customers who dance away with someone else at the slightest enticement”.

Reichheld argues that there are some customers who do not desire a durable relationship with the firm. In contrast, there are others who desire a lasting relationship with the organization and as a result buy frequently, are ready to pay premium promptly and it costs less to serve them (Kadampully & Suhartanto, 2019; Fodness & Murray, 2017). To be successful in keeping customers, a firm should implement a combination of strategies such as defining and measuring relation through surveys, attracting the right customers from the right places, employing creative filtering to reduce the selection of unwanted customers, giving sales people incentives to retain customers not just by acquiring new ones and rewarding long-time relationships to customers (Ayele, 2012).

Measures of Customer Retention

Customer retention measures how well the expectations of a customer concerning a product or service provided by your company have been met. Customer retention is an abstract concept and involves such factors as the quality of the product, the quality of the service provided, the atmosphere of the location where the product or service is purchased, and the price of the product or service. Businesses often use customer retention surveys to gauge customer satisfaction.

Patronage Intentions

Consumers' purchasing intentions, according to Fishbein and Ajzen (1975), are an important signal for predicting consumer behaviour in general. When a buyer has a strong desire to purchase a particular product in the future, this is referred to as patronage intention. Zeithaml (1988) observes that in organizations, merchandise value discernment promotes purchase intentions as well as purchase actions. As a result, it has been discovered that product value has an impact on purchase intention. In addition, consumers' aspiration to purchase can be seen as a connection between their attitude toward a product and their actual purchase of that thing.

Patronage Action

Important to understand is that a customer's purchase action is guided by psychological principles that have been developed to harness an understanding of consumers' needs so that products can be developed, designed, and communicated in a way that is appropriate for consumers and reflects their relevant and significant needs.

In another context, the term "re-patronage action" could be used to refer to the act of making repeated purchases. According to Wirtz and Lwin (2009), re-patronization is defined as an individual's willingness to patronize a service organization again. The development of commitment occurs in a relationship established on trust, which then becomes a significant predictor of future purchases. Customers return to a certain company on a frequent basis because they have a positive view of trust in the company, which means they believe that the company has their best interests at heart when providing a service (Caudill and Murphy 2000).

Empirical Review of Quality Service Initiative and Customer Retention

This section reviews studies carried out by other researchers on quality service initiative and customer retention.

Al-Azzam (2015) studied the impact of service quality on customer satisfaction: a field study of Arab Bank in Irbid City, Jordan. The study used the model of service quality with five dimensions to evaluate its effect on the customer satisfaction. The results indicated that the higher the service quality, the more the customer's satisfaction. The findings also indicated that the five factors of service quality positively affected the customer satisfaction. This study was conducted in the banking industry whose customers differ in the social, economic and cultural elements from the customers that the current study that was conducted among four-star hotels in Port Harcourt.

Rahhal (2015) evaluated the effects of service quality on customer satisfaction: an empirical investigation in Syrian Mobile Telecommunication Services. Convenience sampling was used to select 600 mobile phone service users and was distributed among the Damascus and Aleppo. Confirmatory factor analysis was used in the analysis. The findings of the study showed the direct significant impact of service quality on customer satisfaction. This study was conducted in the Syria, while the current study was conducted among four-star hotels in Port Harcourt.

Olatokun and Ojo (2014) did a study on the influence of service quality on consumers' satisfaction with mobile telecommunication services in Nigeria. Using survey design, the study assessed customer satisfaction with mobile telecommunication services in Ibadan, a Nigerian municipality. A structured questionnaire, consisting of SERVQUAL dimensions of reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy and tangibility, was used to collect data. Convenience sampling technique was used to select 431 mobile telecommunication users to measure their satisfaction level. Findings revealed Responsiveness, Assurance and Empathy to be significant in explaining customer satisfaction. The findings may further strengthen the position of the

regulatory authorities in developing policies that will address customers' satisfaction based on defined priorities. This study was conducted in mobile telecommunication services while the current study was conducted among four-star hotels in Port Harcourt.

METHODOLOGY

The focus of this study was to examine the nexus between quality service initiatives and customer retention. The study adopted a descriptive research design and utilized questionnaire as instrument of inquiry.

The population of the study consists of four (4) star hotels in Port Harcourt. The study focused attention on officers with job titles such as hotel managers, operations managers, heads of departments, unit heads and duty managers or supervisors. All those within these categories will constitute the elements of this study. The study will solicit information from 1 hotel manager, 3 operations managers, 4 heads of department, 3-unit heads and 4 duty managers or supervisors, giving a total of fifteen (15) respondents per four-star hotel, giving a total of sixty (60) respondents as sample for this study.

S/N	4-Star Hotels
1	Golden Tulip Port Harcourt Hotel
2	Juanita Hotels
3	Sparkyln Hotels and Suit
4	Swiss International Mabisel

Source: Trip Advisor, 2023

DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

The data collected was analysed using the Spearman Rank Correlation with the aid of Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS)

Relationship between Tangibility and Customer Retention

Table 1: Correlation Matrix for Tangibility and Customer Retention

			Tangibility	Patronage Intention	Patronage Action
Spearman's rho	Tangibility	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.857**	.724**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.000	.000
		N	60	60	60
Patronage Intention	Patronage Intention	Correlation Coefficient	.857**	1.000	.840**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.	.000
		N	60	60	60
Patronage Action	Patronage Action	Correlation Coefficient	.724**	.840**	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.
		N	60	60	60

	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.
	N	60	60	60

Source: Research Data 2023 and SPSS output version 23.0

Table 1, illustrates the test for the three previously postulated bivariate hypothetical statements. The results show that for

H₀₁: There is no significant relationship between tangibility and patronage intention of four-star hotels in Port Harcourt

The correlation coefficient (r) shows that there is a significant and positive relationship between tangibility and patronage intention. The *rho* value 0.857 indicates this relationship and it is significant at $p < 0.000 < 0.05$. The correlation coefficient represents a very strong relationship. Therefore, based on empirical findings the null hypothesis earlier stated is hereby rejected and the alternate upheld. Thus, there is a significant relationship between tangibility and patronage intention of four-star hotels in Port Harcourt.

H₀₂: There is no significant relationship between tangibility and patronage action of four-star hotels in Port Harcourt

The correlation coefficient (r) shows that there is a significant and positive relationship between tangibility and patronage action. The *rho* value 0.724 indicates this relationship and it is significant at $p < 0.000 < 0.05$. The correlation coefficient represents a strong relationship. Therefore, based on empirical findings the null hypothesis earlier stated is hereby rejected and the alternate upheld. Thus, there is a significant relationship between tangibility and patronage action of four-star hotels in Port Harcourt.

Relationship between Responsiveness and Customer Retention

Table 2: Correlation Matrix for Responsiveness and Customer Retention

			Responsiveness	Patronage Intention	Patronage Action
Spearman's rho	Responsiveness	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.607**	.878**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.000	.000
		N	60	60	60
	Patronage Intention	Correlation Coefficient	.607**	1.000	.840**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.	.000
		N	60	60	60
	Patronage Action	Correlation Coefficient	.878**	.840**	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.
		N	60	60	60

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Source: Research Data 2023 and SPSS v23

Table 2, illustrates the test for the last three previously postulated bivariate hypothetical statements. The results show that for

H₀₃: There is no significant relationship between responsiveness and patronage intention of four star hotels in Port Harcourt

The correlation coefficient (r) shows that there is a significant and positive relationship between responsiveness and patronage intention. The *rho* value 0.607 indicates this relationship and it is significant at $p < 0.000 < 0.05$. The correlation coefficient represents a strong relationship. Therefore, based on empirical findings the null hypothesis earlier stated is hereby rejected and the alternate upheld. Thus, there is a significant relationship between responsiveness and patronage intention of four-star hotels in Port Harcourt.

H₀₄: There is no significant relationship between responsiveness and patronage action of four star hotels in Port Harcourt

The correlation coefficient (r) shows that there is a significant and positive relationship between responsiveness and patronage action. The *rho* value 0.878 indicates this relationship and it is significant at $p < 0.000 < 0.05$. The correlation coefficient represents a very correlation indicating. Therefore, based on empirical findings the null hypothesis earlier stated is hereby rejected and the alternate upheld. Thus, there is a significant relationship between responsiveness and patronage action of four-star hotels in Port Harcourt.

Relationship between Empathy and Customer Retention

Table 3: Correlation Matrix for Empathy and Customer Retention

		Patronage			
		Empathy	e Intention	Patronage Action	
Spearman's rho	Empathy	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.839**	.783**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.000	.000
		N	60	60	60
Patronage Intention		Correlation Coefficient	.839**	1.000	.840**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.	.000
		N	60	60	60
Patronage Action		Correlation Coefficient	.783**	.840**	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.
		N	60	60	60

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Source: Research Data 2023 and SPSS v23

Table 3, illustrates the test for the second three set previously postulated bivariate hypothetical statements. The results show that for

H₀₅: There is no significant relationship between empathy and patronage intention of four-star hotels in Port Harcourt

The correlation coefficient (r) shows that there is a significant and positive relationship between empathy and patronage intention. The ρ value 0.839 indicates this relationship and it is significant at $p < 0.000 < 0.05$. The correlation coefficient represents a very correlation. Therefore, based on empirical findings the null hypothesis earlier stated is hereby rejected and the alternate upheld. Thus, there is a significant relationship between empathy and patronage intention of four-star hotels in Port Harcourt

H₀₆: There is no significant relationship between empathy and patronage action of four-star hotels in Port Harcourt.

The correlation coefficient (r) shows that there is a significant and positive relationship between empathy and patronage intention. The ρ value 0.783 indicates this relationship and it is significant at $p < 0.000 < 0.05$. The correlation coefficient represents a strong correlation. Therefore, based on empirical findings the null hypothesis earlier stated is hereby rejected and the alternate upheld. Thus, there is a significant relationship between empathy and patronage intention of four-star hotels in Port Harcourt

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

In this study, we investigated the impact of quality service initiatives and customer retention of four-star hotels in Port Harcourt. On the basis of our study, the following conclusions were drawn; that there is positive relationship between quality service initiatives and customer retention. The findings indicate that establishment of higher levels of quality will lead customers to have higher level of satisfaction. The study therefore made the following recommendations to the industry based on the findings. That management of four-star hotels in Port Harcourt should pay attention to quality service initiatives and other factors which may lead to customer retention. They should also put more emphasis on quality service initiatives dimensions in order to create customer retention. The management should therefore train and motivate employees to practice all the quality service initiatives dimensions on all the determinants of customer retention so as to increase company's customer base.

This study on quality service initiative and customer retention of four-star hotels in Port Harcourt has made salient findings that will be helpful both to theorists and marketing practitioners, especially in the service sector.

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