

## **Impact of Human Resource Management Practices on Customer Patronage in the Hotel Industry: A Case Study of Port Harcourt, Rivers State, Nigeria**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This study investigated the influence of human resource management practices on customer repeat patronage within the hotel industry of Port Harcourt Local Government, Rivers State. The descriptive survey design was adopted for the study. The population for the study comprised hotel staff and guests of hotels. A sample size of 110 hotel staff and 110 guests were selected for the study with a commendable response rate of 91% achieved. The instrument used for data collection was a self-structured questionnaire which was validated by three validates. The Cronbach Alpha was used in determining the reliability of the instrument and a reliability coefficient of 0.72 was obtained. The data generated were analyzed using mean, percentage, and standard deviation. The 20.0 version of Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) was used to code the data obtained. The hypotheses were tested at 0.05 level of significance using t-test. The test of hypotheses revealed that the three hypotheses were accepted. The findings reveal a positive perception among hotel employees regarding training and development practices, with room for improvement in interpersonal skills training. Employee empowerment practices, including autonomy and decision-making, were perceived positively, emphasizing the need to encourage employees to take initiatives independently. Employee engagement and morale-building practices were also well-received, highlighting the importance of fostering a positive work environment. Importantly, this study establishes a significant and positive relationship between human resource practices and customer patronage. The practical implications suggest that tailoring training programs, empowering employees with clear guidelines, involving employees in decision-making, and continuing to organize team-building activities are vital strategies for enhancing customer satisfaction, loyalty, and profitability in the competitive hotel industry.*

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**Keywords:** *Human resource management; Customer repeat patronage; Hotel industry; Training and development; Employees*

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## INTRODUCTION

The primary goal of every business is to attract and retain customers. Consumer patronage refers to the concept of customers repeatedly purchasing the same brand from the same seller. Patronage is crucial for the competitiveness, profitability, and survival of any business, making it a significant concern in today's business world. In the hospitality industry, especially in hotels, patronage (the frequency of customers visiting over a given period) becomes even more critical due to the nature of the product offered, which cannot be stored and is lost if not utilized within a specific timeframe (Olugbemi *et al.*, 2020). It is natural for hotel operators to invest in tremendous number of resources in ensuring repeat patronage. As repeat patronage constitutes a critical barometer for assessing hotel performance, an in-depth appreciation of the factors that drives consumer patronage is paramount to hotel management (Li *et al.*, 2020).

According to Ahmad *et al.* (2013), what determines a customer's choice of selecting or patronizing hotels differs from country to country as well as from region to region as a result of differences in cultural, environmental and socioeconomic factors. In hospitality industry, service quality has been found to be important in influencing customer satisfaction and future intentions to request for further services as well (Olugbemi *et al.*, 2020). Customer satisfaction is a direct result of the quality of services provided, leading to increased customer loyalty and retention. Loyal customers not only continue to use the hotel's services but also promote it through word-of-mouth, ultimately boosting the hotel's revenue. Consequently, any shift in customers' patronage can significantly impact the hotel's long-term revenue. A study conducted in Benue State on the impact of business location on hotel patronage revealed that innovative parking spaces, accessible road networks, and assured security and safety of guests can lead to repeat patronage, customer retention, and customer referrals (Faajira and Nyagba, 2022). In Ghanaian hotels, direct personnel services and room quality were identified as key determinants of customer satisfaction, surpassing the influence of the outside environment (Sadik, 2020). Furthermore, Olugbemi *et al.* (2020) reported that a majority of customers visit hotels not only for good food, quality service, and a pleasant environment but also because they believe that the price they pay represents good value for money. Based on the information provided, it is clear that various factors, such as service quality, atmospheric quality, perceived value, and demographics, as well as the dynamic nature of consumers, can impact patronage. The factors driving customer satisfaction are ambiguous and disputed. Therefore, managers of the hotel need to know the most influential factors and make effective decisions.

Human resource management practices play a crucial role in influencing customer satisfaction and repeat customer behaviour. Human resource management (HRM) practices refer to the activities, policies, and strategies employed by organizations to effectively manage their workforce (Armstrong and Taylor, 2020). These practices are designed to attract, select, develop, motivate, and retain employees to achieve organizational goals and objectives. According to Dessler (2013), human resource management is grounded in policies and procedures that govern various departmental operations, including recruitment, selection, compensation, training and development, and public relations, among others. The human capital of an organization is a key component that cannot be overlooked. Even in today's contemporary business environment, organizations continue to face challenges related to human resources, which significantly impact organizational performance and contribute to overall development and growth (Dessler, 2013). For the hospitality industry, it is imperative to establish effective human resource management practices that promote customer patronage

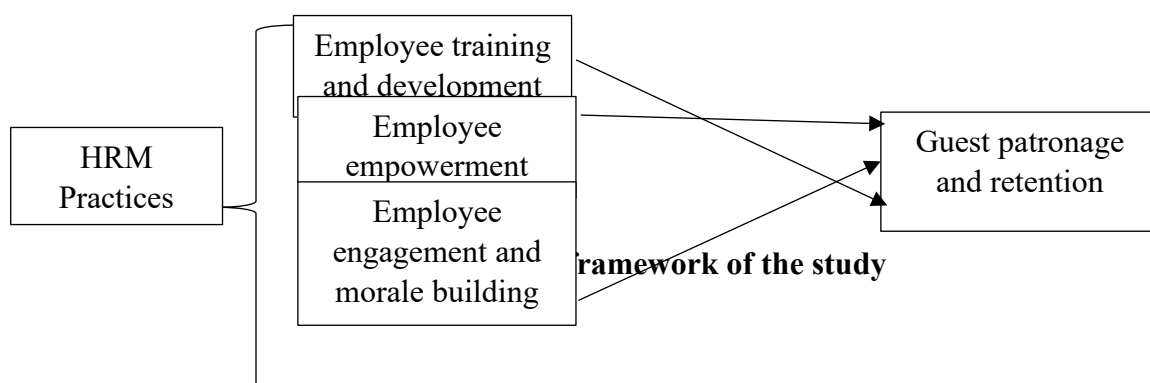
of the firm, thereby fostering improved organizational performance (Azhar, 2019). It is necessary to mobilize the human resources in order to engage them in the process of hotel development and nation building (Thavamin and Kannan, 2016). This mobilization entails the development of their knowledge, attitudes, and skills, enabling them to competently achieve the predetermined goals of the hotels. Efficient and professional management is undoubtedly a prerequisite for successful tourism development. Equally significant is the quality of staff training, which is often overlooked during the early stages of developing the tourism sector (Wariboko, 2016). A developing destination in the tourism industry must take the necessary measures to ensure the availability of skilled and well-trained individuals to fill the positions that will subsequently be created.

In the dynamic and highly competitive hospitality industry, hotels in Port Harcourt face significant challenges in attracting and retaining customers while ensuring their satisfaction. It is evident that the success of hotels largely depends on the effectiveness of their human resource management practices, as these practices directly influence employee performance and the quality of services offered. Despite the importance of human resource management, there is limited research on how specific HR practices impact customer patronage in hotels within the Port Harcourt region. Furthermore, the high diversity of customers with varying expectations poses a unique challenge for hotels in meeting the needs of every guest, and some customers may perceive the services as disappointing due to inconsistencies in service delivery. This discrepancy suggests the possible existence of inequities in the implementation of HR practices across hotels, contributing to varying levels of customer satisfaction. This study thus examined the influence of human resource management practices on customer repeat patronage in the hotel industry in Port Harcourt Local Government, Rivers State.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework suggests that when the selection procedure is conducted scientifically, ensuring the right fit for the organization, and when adequate training is provided to employees, enabling them to acquire essential skills and knowledge. Furthermore, when employees are effectively engaged in their roles and responsibilities, and their morale is strengthened through positive work environments and recognition, combined with appropriate and timely compensation and salaries that are relatively adequate, and opportunities for clear career development and advancement, these factors collectively lead to increased customer patronage.



### **Human Resource Management Practices**

Employees as human resources are the most important resources within an organization that help in achieving a competitive advantage (Wheelen and Hunger, 2013). Human resource management (HRM) is the management of an organization's workforce or human resources. It is responsible for the recruitment, selection, training, assessment, and rewarding of employees, while in addition overseeing organizational leadership and culture and ensuring the compliance with employment and labour laws of a country (William and Owusu-Acheampong, 2016). People in work organizations are endowed with broad range of abilities, talents and attitudes. Human resources are considered the most critical factor (Dominguez, 2011), and contribute to the success of any organisation. Human resources are considered critical factor contributing to an organisational success (Dominguez, 2011) and the effective management and development of these resources is important to the organisation (Yeh, 2013; Juhdi *et al.*, 2011). Therefore, management should develop and constantly improve employee's knowledge-based to accelerate the attainment of the organisational goals (Akhavan *et al.*, 2013). Research suggests that competence and knowledge-based manpower is the most valuable asset of the organisation (Pinho *et al.*, 2012). The world is gradually being a knowledge-based economy (Ubeda-Garcia *et al.*, 2013) and as a result employees should be managed appropriately to enhance their creativity, innovativeness, intuition, loyalty and quality which gives the organisation the competitive edge over competitors (Tan and Nasurdin, 2011).

Human Resource Management (HRM) Practices refer to those organizational activities which are directed at managing the pool of human resources and ensuring that the resources are employed towards the fulfilment of organizational goals (Tiwari and Saxena, 2012). HRM practices may differ from one organization to another and from one country to the other. Several attempts have been made from time to time by different researchers to identify the types of HRM practices in different sectors. In meta-analysis of 104 articles, Boselie *et al.* (2005) identified some human resources practices which include but not limited to; training and development, contingency pay and rewards, performance management, recruitment and selection, internal promotion, job design, employment security, grievance procedures and corporate social responsibility.

### **Customer Patronage**

The hotel industry heavily relies on guest patronage to maintain profitability and achieve success. Patronage, in this context, refers to the extent to which a customer exhibits repeat purchase behaviour from a specific service provider and holds a positive, long-lasting attitude and disposition towards that provider. According to Oladele *et al.* (2019), customer patronage involves a strong commitment to repurchase a firm's products, even at the expense of a competitor's offerings. Seock (2009) describes patronage as the act of repeatedly purchasing from a particular store, whether for the same products or different ones. These perspectives from the aforementioned authors highlight the critical role that patronage plays in determining the survival of any business. It aligns with the viewpoint of Ogwo & Igwe (2012) that the primary purpose of establishing a business is to attract and retain customers.

Guest patronage in the hotel industry refers to the act of customers selecting and staying at a particular hotel over other available options. Building guest loyalty is crucial for hotel establishments as repeat business contributes significantly to revenue generation and the overall success of the business. Guest patronage involves a complex interplay of factors, including service quality, brand image, customer preferences, and competitive advantages

(Obeke and Abugu, 2021). Repeat business from loyal guests contributes significantly to a hotel's bottom line. Not only do returning guests spend more during their stays, but they are also more likely to book directly with the hotel, reducing commission expenses. Moreover, loyal guests often act as brand ambassadors, promoting the hotel to their network, further enhancing the hotel's reputation and attracting new potential guests (Shyju *et al.*, 2023).

### **Theoretical Framework**

Some theories have been reviewed for the purpose of this study in order to establish a relationship between the dependent and the independent variables. The theories are:

#### **Theory of Reasoned Action**

The Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA) was first proposed by Martin Fishbein and Icek Ajzen in 1967. Later, it was revised and expanded by Icek Ajzen in 1985. The theory posits that human behaviour is primarily determined by an individual's intentions, which, in turn, are influenced by their attitudes towards the behaviour and subjective norms surrounding it. The theory emphasizes the importance of creating a positive work environment, fostering employee engagement, and aligning employee behaviours with customer-focused objectives to enhance customer satisfaction and loyalty, which are critical factors for attracting and retaining hotel guests. The Theory of Reasoned Action can be applied to understand how employees' attitudes towards their work and their perceptions of social norms within the hotel environment can influence their intention to provide excellent customer service. A positive intention to deliver exceptional service is likely to result in actual positive behaviour during guest interactions, leading to higher guest satisfaction and patronage. By considering TRA, the researcher can gain insights into the motivational factors that drive employees to go above and beyond in their service delivery and the importance of creating a supportive work environment that fosters positive attitudes and encourages exceptional customer-focused behaviours.

#### **Motivation-Needs Theory**

The Motivation Need Theory, also known as Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, was proposed by Abraham Maslow in 1943. This theory is based on the idea that human motivation is influenced by a hierarchy of needs that individuals seek to fulfil. According to Maslow, individuals are motivated to meet certain needs, and as each need is satisfied, they progress to fulfil higher-order needs. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs can be relevant in understanding employee motivation and its influence on guest experiences and patronage. Adequate human resource practices can ensure that employees' basic physiological needs, such as fair compensation, job security, and a safe working environment, are met. When these needs are fulfilled, employees can focus on providing better service to guests. Effective human resource management practices can foster a sense of safety and belongingness among employees, creating a supportive work environment. A positive work culture can lead to better teamwork and cooperation, which ultimately impacts guest interactions and satisfaction. Recognition and appreciation for employees' efforts through performance feedback and rewards can enhance their self-esteem and motivation to excel in their roles, contributing to improved customer service and guest experiences. Human resource practices that support employee development and career advancement can promote self-actualization. When employees feel that their personal growth and aspirations are valued, they are more likely to be motivated to deliver exceptional service and enhance guest patronage. By considering Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs in your thesis, the researcher can gain insights into the importance of meeting employees' diverse needs to enhance their motivation, job satisfaction, and overall commitment to

delivering exceptional customer service. Ultimately, a motivated and satisfied workforce is more likely to contribute to positive guest experiences and increased patronage in hotels.

### **Empirical Studies**

Santhanam *et al.* (2017) conducted an insightful exploration into the complex interplay between human resource management practices, breach of psychological contract, and employee turnover intentions within the context of frontline employees in the vibrant Indian hospitality industry. Employing a survey design, the study effectively collected responses from a diverse pool of 294 frontline employees, encompassing individuals in front-office and food and beverage services. The results of this study shed light on the pivotal role played by human resource management practices, including selection, training, and compensation, in influencing the intentions of employees to stay or leave their positions. Notably, the study also brought to light an intriguing finding, showcasing that despite the implementation of effective human resource management practices, the presence of a psychological contract breach still had a detrimental impact on employee turnover intentions. It is evident that the present study serves as a relevant point of reference, given its examination of how human resource management practices impact employee turnover.

In a different vein, the study conducted by Olugbemi *et al.* (2020) sought to delve into the multifaceted factors that influence hotel patronage in the vibrant Ikorodu Local Government Area of Lagos State, Nigeria. Their research venture involved the collection of primary data through a cross-sectional survey encompassing 203 respondents. Utilizing a meticulous multi-stage sampling technique across various communities within the Local Government Areas, the study unveiled several compelling insights. Among the factors affecting hotel patronage, the study highlighted the significance of staff hygiene and neat uniforms, the allure of attractive outdoor surroundings, the well-maintained ambiance of hotel interiors and exteriors, the vital aspect of hotel sanitation, the harmony of colour usage in common hotel areas, and the appeal of pleasant music playing within hotel premises. Additionally, the study offered valuable recommendations, emphasizing the need for hotel managers to provide services that commensurate with the expectations of their esteemed guests. Notably, the study touched upon the aspect of staff performance, advocating for ongoing staff training focused on relationship marketing and the art of courtesy to enhance guest experiences.

Obeke and Abugu (2021) established the key determinants of guests' preferences for hotels within the vibrant Enugu State, Nigeria. Their research involved meticulously selecting hotels across the three senatorial zones of Enugu State, with both hotel staff and guests participating as valuable respondents. The sample size for this study was 312, and through a well-crafted survey design, valuable primary data was collected, focusing on guests' perceptions. The findings of the study illuminated the importance of factors such as convenience, brand image, and service trust, which significantly and positively influenced guests' preferences for particular hotels. Unsurprisingly, guests tended to favour hotels with superior convenience, a well-crafted brand image, and a sense of service trust when making their lodging selections.

The research conducted by Faajiar and Nyagba (2022) delved into the fascinating effect of business location on customer patronage within the captivating region of Benue State, Nigeria. This study explored the direct impact of parking space, road network and accessibility, and security and safety on customer patronage in the thriving hotel industry. Their well-structured survey design led to the collection of valuable data from a population of 474, which included both hotel staff and guests. Notably, the study highlighted the significance of parking space,

road network, accessibility, and security and safety in influencing customer decisions regarding hotel patronage. The study advocated for innovative measures to improve these factors, as it was found that repeat patronage, customer retention, and customer referrals could be significantly achieved through their enhancement.

## METHODOLOGY

**Research Design:** The study adopted a descriptive survey design, which ensured ease in understanding insights and ideas about the problem.

**Area of the Study:** The area of study for this research is Port Harcourt Local Government, Rivers State. Port Harcourt is a major city and the capital of Rivers State in Nigeria. It is known for its vibrant economy, diverse industries, and significant tourism potential. The selected hotels in Port Harcourt Local Government represent a specific segment of the hospitality industry in the area. These hotels cater to both business and leisure travellers and play a crucial role in promoting tourism and contributing to the local economy. Port Harcourt, as a strategic location for this research, offers several advantages. It is a hub for tourism, business, and commerce, attracting a significant number of visitors and potential customers for the hotels under study. The city's diverse population and economic activities provide a fertile ground for investigating the impact of HR practices on profitability. Furthermore, Port Harcourt's location in Rivers State, known for its natural beauty, cultural heritage, and tourist attractions such as the Port Harcourt Tourist Beach, Isaac Boro Garden Park, and the Rivers State Museum, makes it an ideal setting for examining the relationship between HR practices and customer patronage in a tourism-driven environment.

**Population of the Study:** The target population for this study comprised hotel staff (management and administrative staff, guest services, chefs and cooks) and customers of hotels in Port Harcourt. As reported by hotels.ng (2023), the total number of hotels in Port Harcourt is four hundred and seventeen.

**Sample and Sampling Technique:** The sample size was determined by use of the following formula. The Cochran's formula for sample size determination in an unknown population was used to determine the number of customers to be sampled. The Cochran's formula is given as;

$$N_0 = \frac{Z^2 pq}{e^2}$$

Where:  $N_0$  = sample size required;

$Z$  = Standard deviation for the desired confidence value

$P$  = Is the estimated proportion of the population that possesses a certain characteristic or outcome. Based on pilot data, it is estimated that approximately 85% of customers are satisfied with their hotel experiences.

$q = (1 - p)$  is the estimated proportion of the population that does not possess the characteristic or outcome, and

$e$  = Level of significance

$$N_0 = \frac{1.96 * 0.85 * 0.15}{0.05 * 0.05}$$

= 100 respondents

10% was added to take care of Attrition =  $100 + 10 = 110$

This study employed a multi-stage sampling technique in the selection of the sample of hotels for the study. In the first stage, the hotels were grouped based on their location in Port Harcourt (Rumokoro, Diobu, D/Line, Trans Amadi and GRA). A list of names of the registered hotels in the various locations was compiled. The second stage was the use of simple random sampling technique for the selection of two hotels from each location. In stage three, 10 hotel guests and 10 hotel staff were selected from each of the hotels to make a total of 100 hotel guests and 100 hotel staff for the study.

**Data Collection Instrument:** The instrument for data collection was a structured questionnaire titled ‘Effect of Human Resource Management Practices on the Patronage of Hotels in Port Harcourt Local Government’ (EHRMPPHPLG). The responses to EHRMPPHPLG was designed on a 4-point rating scale of measurement of Strongly Agree (SA), Agree (A), Disagree (D) and Strongly Disagree (SD), with values 4, 3, 2, and 1. The questionnaire consisted of two main sections which include; Section one was concerned with demographic information while the rest of the sections was concerned with the three research objectives.

**Reliability and Validity Tests:** The degree to which an evaluation tool produces consistent and reliable results is referred to as reliability. Cronbach's alpha will be used to assess the instrument's item reliability. A trial test will be carried out using 20 hotel guests and 2 hotel managers in Obio Akpor who are not involved in the main study. On return of the instrument, scores from the trial test were subjected to Cronbach Alpha statistical reliability test to determine the reliability index of the instrument and a coefficient of 0.72 was obtained for all the items. The instrument showed high reliability and thus considered satisfactory and stable for the study.

**Data Collection Procedure:** The administration of the questionnaire to the selected respondents was conducted by the researcher. The researcher sought appointments with respondents, explained the need of the research, the content of the questionnaire and oversees the administration of the exercise.

**Data Analysis:** After data collection, the researcher thoroughly screened, reviewed, compiled, and checked the data for completeness, consistency, and accuracy. The data analysis was conducted according to the objectives of the study. Data editing, classification, coding, and entry was performed using Microsoft Excel, while the analysis was carried out using the Statistical Package for Social Science (IBM SPSS) Version 20. Descriptive analysis, such as calculating frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations, were conducted. The determinants of the (decision point) human resource management practices and their influence on customer patronage were determined thus: Strongly Agree (SA) (4) with real limit of 3.50-4.00; Agree (3) with real limit of 2.50 – 3.49; Disagree (D) (2) with real limit of 1.50 – 2.49 and Strongly Disagree (1) with real limit of 1.00 -1.49. The decision rule was set based on the cut-off mark of 2.50 mean score. To arrive at a cut-off mark of 2.50, the researcher computed the scores in this manner,  $1+2+3+4= 10/4= 2.5$ . The implication is that any items with mean score lower than 2.50 was Disagree (D) and therefore rejected, while items with mean scores of 2.50 and above was accepted as Agree (A) and therefore retained. In testing the hypotheses, where the calculated t-value is less than critical value of 0.05 ( $p < 0.05$ ) the variables and the null hypotheses was rejected. On the other hand, where the p-value is greater than 0.05 ( $p > 0.05$ ), the null hypothesis was accepted, indicating there is no significant difference in the variables tested.



## RESULTS

A total of 110 hotel staff and 110 hotel guests were actively engaged in this research. We employed structured questionnaires to meticulously collect data on diverse demographic and socioeconomic characteristics, as well as human resource management practices that held the potential to influence guest patronage. Impressively, out of the 110 questionnaires that were administered, a commendable response rate of 91% was achieved. This high level of responsiveness underscores the dedication and cooperation exhibited by both the participating individuals and the establishments that cooperated with this study.

### Demographic Characteristics of the Hotel Staff and Guests

Table 1 presents an overview of the demographic characteristics of both hotel guests and staff. The study revealed that 56% of the hotel guests were male, while 44% were female. Conversely, among the staff, 42% were male, and 58% were female. Regarding age distribution, a significant proportion of the guests (45%) fell within the 35-44 years age group, followed by 20% in the age groups of 25-34 and 55 years and above. On the other hand, half of the hotel staff (50%) were within the 35-44 years age bracket, with 21% aged 55 years and above and 15% falling within the 25-34 years age group. In terms of the purpose of their stay, a majority of the hotel guests (47%) indicated that their stay was related to business, followed by those attending events/conferences (24%). Furthermore, among the hotel staff, the majority (42%) were aged 45 years and above. The hotels they worked in were predominantly luxury hotels (50%), with mid-range hotels accounting for 33% of the establishments.

**Table 1. Demographic characteristics of hotel guests and staff**

Variables	Hotel Guests (n=100)		Hotel Staff (n=100)	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
<b>Sex</b>				
Male	56	56.00	42	42.00
Female	44	44.00	58	58.00
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>Age</b>				
18-24	15	15.00	14	14.00
25-34	20	20.00	15	15.00
35-44	45	45.00	50	50.00
55 above	20	20.00	21	21.00
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>Purpose of Stay</b>				
Business	47	47.00	-	-
Leisure/Vacation	17	17.00	-	-
Family visit	12	12.00	-	-
Events/Conference	24	24.00	-	-
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>		
<b>Years of Experience as a hotel staff</b>				
18-24	-	-	5	5.00
<b>25-34</b>	-	-	16	16.00
35-44	-	-	37	37.00
45 above	-	-	42	42.00

<b>Total</b>	-	-	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>Type of Hotel</b>				
Luxury	-	-	50	50.00
Mid-range	-	-	33	33.00
Budget	-	-	17	17.00
<b>Total</b>	-	-	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>

### Research Questions

#### Training and Development Practices Implemented for Hotel Staff In Port Harcourt Local Government area (PHALGA)

**Table 2. Mean and standard deviation on the employee training and development practices of hotel industry in PHALGA**

S/N	Employee Training and Development Practices	$\bar{X}$	N=100 SD	RMK
1.	Employees in this hotel receive adequate training to perform their job effectively.	3.68	0.47	A
2.	Training programs in the hotel equip employees with the necessary skills to provide high-quality customer service.	3.54	0.63	A
3.	The hotel offers regular training sessions to update employees on new service techniques and industry trends.	3.52	0.50	A
4.	Training programs in this hotel focus on enhancing employee communication and interpersonal skills.	3.25	0.69	A
	<b>Grand Mean</b>	<b>3.50</b>	<b>0.57</b>	<b>A</b>

Keys:  $\bar{X}$  = Mean; N= Number of hotel staff; A= Agree

The Table 2 above revealed the means and standard deviation on the on the employee training and development practices of hotel industry in PHALGA. The results revealed that the lowest mean score was  $\bar{X} = 3.25$  (Item 4) while the highest mean score was  $\bar{X} = 3.68$  (Item 1). The table also revealed that the grand mean score  $\bar{X} = 3.50$  while the grand standard deviation was 0.57. Furthermore, the table revealed that the respondents agreed with all the items.

#### Employee Empowerment Practices Applied among Hotel Staff in Port Harcourt Local Government Area (PHALGA)

**Table 3. Mean and standard deviation on the employee empowerment practices of hotel industry in PHALGA**

S/N	Employee Empowerment Practices	$\bar{X}$	N=100 SD	RMK
1.	Employees in this hotel have the authority to make decisions to address customer needs promptly.	3.00	0.00	A
2.	The hotel encourages employees to take initiatives to resolve customer issues independently.	2.92	0.27	A

3.	The hotel provides a supportive environment that allows employees to use their judgment to enhance customer experiences.	3.10	0.75	A
4.	Employees have the freedom to make small decisions that can positively impact customer interactions.	3.06	0.63	A
<b>Grand Mean</b>		<b>3.02</b>	<b>0.41</b>	<b>A</b>

Keys:  $\bar{X}$  = Mean; N= Number of hotel staff; A= Agree

Table 3 above revealed the means and standard deviation on the employee empowerment practices applied among hotel staff in Port Harcourt Local Government Area. The results revealed that the lowest mean score was  $\bar{X} = 2.92$  (Item 2) while the highest mean score was  $\bar{X} = 3.10$  (Item 3). The table also revealed that the average mean score was  $\bar{X} = 3.02$ , while average standard deviation was 0.41. The table also showed that the respondents agreed to all the items.

### Practices Employed to Engage and Build Morale among Hotel Staff in Port Harcourt Local Government Area (PHALGA)

**Table 4. Mean and standard deviation on the employee engagement and morale building practices of hotel industry in PHALGA**

S/N	Employee Engagement and Morale Building	$\bar{X}$	N=100 SD	RMK
1.	The hotel encourages a positive work environment that fosters employee morale.	3.16	0.37	A
2.	There are opportunities for employees to participate in decision-making processes in the hotel.	3.08	0.27	A
3.	The hotel organizes team-building activities to enhance employee collaboration and teamwork.	3.93	0.27	A
4.	Employees are recognized and rewarded for their outstanding contributions to customer service.	3.93	0.26	A
<b>Grand Mean</b>		<b>3.53</b>	<b>0.29</b>	<b>A</b>

Keys:  $\bar{X}$  = Mean; N= Number of hotel staff; A= Agree

Table 4 above revealed the means and standard deviation on the employee engagement and morale building practices of hotel industry in Port Harcourt Local Government Area. The results revealed that the lowest mean score was  $\bar{X} = 3.08$  (Item 2) while the highest mean score was  $\bar{X} = 3.93$  (Items 3 and 4). The table also revealed that the average mean score was  $\bar{X} = 3.53$ , while average standard deviation was 0.29. The table also showed that the respondents agreed to all the items.

### Patterns of Patronage exhibited by Customers and Hotel Guests in Selected Hotels within Port Harcourt Local Government area

**Table 5. Mean and standard deviation on customer patronage of hotels in PHALGA**

S/N	Customer Patronage	N=100		
		$\bar{X}$	SD	RMK
1.	I consider revisiting the hotel in the future for another stay.	3.27	0.45	A
2.	I am satisfied with the experience at the hotel.	2.91	0.29	A
3.	I am likely to recommend the hotel to friends, family, or colleagues based on my current experience.	3.28	0.45	A
4.	I am satisfied with the hotel's efforts in addressing and resolving any issues or complaints I may have had during my stay.	3.46	0.50	A
5.	I am satisfied with the variety and quality of food and beverage options available at the hotel.	3.00	0.43	A
6.	I am satisfied with the cleanliness and maintenance of the hotel premises.	3.27	0.45	A
7.	I am satisfied with the in-room facilities and amenities.	3.28	0.45	A
	<b>Grand Mean</b>	<b>3.21</b>	<b>0.43</b>	<b>A</b>

Keys:  $\bar{X}$  = Mean; N= Number of hotel guests; A= Agree

Table 5 above revealed the means and standard deviation on the customer patronage of hotels in Port Harcourt Local Government Area. The results revealed that the lowest mean score was  $\bar{X} = 2.91$  (Item 2) while the highest mean score was  $\bar{X} = 3.46$  (Item 4). The table also revealed that the average mean score was  $\bar{X} = 3.21$ , while average standard deviation was 0.43. The grand mean score of 3.21 and the agreement response key affirm the positive perception and agreement among respondents regarding these various aspects of their hotel experiences.

### Research Hypothesis

#### Hypothesis One:

There is no significant influence of employee training and development on customer patronage in the hotel industry in Port Harcourt Local Government Area. The analysis of this hypothesis is presented in Table 6.

**Table 6. Independent t-test analysis on the influence of employee training and development on customer patronage in the hotel industry in PHALGA**

Variable	Prob. level	Df	t-cal	t-crit	Remark
Employee Training and Development (X)	0.05	98	5.851	1.660	Significant
Customer Patronage (Y)					

Level of Significance at 0.05, degree of freedom = 98, Tab value= 5.851, Cal value= 1.660

The result of the above analysis as presented in Table 4.6 shows that the calculated t- value of 5.851 is higher than the critical t- value of 1.660 at 0.05 level of significance and 98 degree of freedom. The alternate hypothesis was retained. This result therefore implies that there is a significant influence of employee training and development on customer patronage in the hotel

industry in Port Harcourt Local Government Area. This demonstrates that hotels with a well-trained and developed workforce will experience elevated levels of customer patronage.

**Hypothesis Two:**

There is no significant influence of employee empowerment on customer patronage in the hotel industry in Port Harcourt Local Government Area. The analysis of this hypothesis is presented in Table 7.

**Table 7. Independent t-test analysis on the influence of employee empowerment on customer patronage in the hotel industry in PHALGA**

Variable	Prob. level	Df	t-cal	t-crit	Remark
Employee Empowerment (X)	0.05	98	5.877	1.660	Significant
Customer Patronage (Y)	Level of Significance at 0.05, degree of freedom = 98, Tab value= 5.877, Cal value= 1.660				

The result of the above analysis in Table 7 shows that the calculated t-value of 5.877 is higher than the critical t-value of 1.660 at 0.05 level of significance and 98 degree of freedom. Therefore, the null hypothesis of no significant influence of employee empowerment on customer patronage was rejected while the alternate hypothesis was retained. The result therefore implies that there is a significant influence of employee empowerment on customer patronage in the industry in Port Harcourt Local Government Area. It underscores that the empowerment of employees is associated with an increase in customer patronage, highlighting the positive relationship between these two variables.

**Hypothesis Three:**

There is no significant influence of employee engagement and morale building on customer patronage in the hotel industry in Port Harcourt Local Government Area. The analysis of this hypothesis is presented in Table 8.

**Table 8. Independent t-test analysis on the influence of employee engagement and morale building on customer patronage in the hotel industry in PHALGA**

Variable	Prob. level	Df	t-cal	t-crit	Remark
Employee Engagement and Morale Building (X)	0.05	98	8.588	1.660	Significant
Customer Patronage (Y)	Level of Significance at 0.05, degree of freedom = 98, Tab value= 8.588, Cal value= 1.660				

The result of the above analysis as presented in Table 4.8 shows that the calculated t- value of 8.588 is higher than the critical t- value of 1.660 at 0.05 level of significance and 98 degree of

freedom. The alternate hypothesis was retained. This result therefore implies that there is a significant influence of employee engagement and morale building on customer patronage in the hotel industry in Port Harcourt Local Government Area. This proves that when employees in the hotel industry feel more engaged, it appears to have an impact on the number of customers they attract and retain.

## DISCUSSION

The research question on the training and development practices implemented for hotel staff in Port Harcourt Local Government revealed that the hotel staff agreed with all the items because their mean scores were  $\bar{X} = 2.5$  and above which is the cut-off mark for mean. The study revealed that employees in PHALGA hotels generally perceive the training and development practices positively, with a grand mean of 3.50. This result is consistent with prior research indicating that effective employee training positively impacts employee performance and job satisfaction (Noe, 2016). Specifically, the highest mean score (3.68) for Item 1, which suggests that employees believe they receive adequate training to perform their job effectively, aligns with the concept of training effectiveness as a key driver of employee performance (EL Hajjar *et al.*, 2018; Yimam *et al.*, 2022). While the overall perception is positive, the lower mean score (3.25) for Item 4, which focuses on communication and interpersonal skills training, warrants attention. This finding is in line with previous studies suggesting that employee interpersonal skills can be a significant factor influencing guest satisfaction in the hospitality industry (Quinn *et al.*, 2013). Improved communication and interpersonal skills can lead to better guest-staff interactions, ultimately enhancing the guest experience. Therefore, it is important for hotel management in PHALGA to address this specific aspect of training to further elevate the quality of service and guest satisfaction.

The finding from this hypothesis revealed that there is a substantial and positive influence of employee training and development on customer patronage in the hotel industry in PHALGA. This outcome is consistent with the existing literature on the impact of employee training and development on customer satisfaction and loyalty within the hospitality industry. Several studies have shown that well-trained and motivated employees are more likely to deliver superior service quality, leading to increased customer satisfaction and repeat patronage (Adams, 2019; Sibonde & Dassah, 2021). Effective training equips employees with the necessary skills and knowledge to provide high-quality services, which in turn leads to improved customer satisfaction (Singh, 2023). Well-trained employees are more likely to create positive and memorable guest experiences, which can foster customer loyalty and patronage. From the research question on employee empowerment practices among hotel staff in Port Harcourt Local Government, the findings revealed that the respondents agreed with all the items because their mean scores were  $\bar{X} = 2.5$  and above which is the cut-off mark for mean. The item with the lowest mean score (3.00) is related to employees having the authority to make decisions to address customer needs promptly. While the mean score suggests a positive perception, it is essential to note that this aspect of empowerment might have room for improvement. Empowering employees to address customer needs promptly is crucial for enhancing guest satisfaction (Pandey *et al.*, 2019). Item 2, with a mean score of 2.92, revealed that the hotel encourages employees to take initiatives to resolve customer issues independently. While the mean score is relatively lower, it still indicates a favourable

perception. Encouraging employees to take initiatives is a critical component of empowerment, as it can lead to more creative problem-solving and improved guest experiences (Hieu, 2020). The highest mean score of 3.10 highlights that employees perceive that the hotel provides a supportive environment for them to use their judgment to enhance customer experiences. This indicates a more positive outlook on the support offered for employee decision-making. With a mean score of 3.06, item 4 which is freedom to make small decisions item aligns closely with the overall positive perception of employee empowerment practices. Employees generally believe they have the freedom to make small decisions that positively impact customer interactions. It is crucial for hotel management in PHALGA to consider these results when implementing or refining employee empowerment strategies. Providing a supportive environment and encouraging employees to take initiatives can enhance the quality of customer interactions, potentially leading to increased customer satisfaction and loyalty (Heskett *et al.*, 2008). Moreover, studies have shown that empowered employees tend to be more engaged and motivated, which can positively affect service quality (Gong *et al.*, 2013).

The finding from this hypothesis revealed that there is a substantial and positive impact of employee empowerment on customer patronage in the hotel industry in PHALGA. This result aligns with the theoretical framework that suggests a positive relationship between employee empowerment and customer patronage. Several studies have highlighted that when employees are empowered and motivated to take initiative and make decisions, they are more likely to enhance the customer experience, leading to increased customer satisfaction and loyalty (Al-Hawari *et al.*, 2010; Lillo-Bañuls *et al.*, 2013). The implications of this finding are significant for the hotel industry in PHALGA. It suggests that employee empowerment should be a strategic priority for hotels seeking to increase customer patronage and enhance their competitive edge. Empowered employees tend to be more engaged and committed to their work, which, in turn, positively affects customer interactions and service quality (Al Halbusi *et al.*, 2023). This, in the long run, can lead to higher customer retention and the attraction of new customers through positive word-of-mouth and repeat business (Alkitbi *et al.*, 2020). Additionally, the positive relationship between employee empowerment and customer patronage may also contribute to the financial performance of hotels. Satisfied and loyal customers are more likely to spend more and return for future stays, ultimately benefiting the bottom line of the business (Heskett *et al.*, 2008).

From the research question on the practices employed to engage and build morale among hotel staff in Port Harcourt Local Government, indicate a generally positive perception of employee engagement and morale-building practices, with all items receiving an "Agree" response from the respondents. The grand mean of 3.53 underscores this positive perception. The mean score of 3.16 for item 1 suggests that employees perceive the hotel as encouraging a positive work environment that fosters employee morale. This item reflects the significance of creating a workplace where employees feel motivated and their morale is consistently boosted (Eisenbeiss *et al.*, 2009). With a mean score of 3.08, item 2 indicates that while employees have opportunities to participate in decision-making processes, this aspect of engagement is rated slightly lower compared to the other items. The highest mean score of 3.93 for item 3 underscores that employees perceive the hotel as actively organizing team-building activities to enhance collaboration and teamwork. This is a critical aspect of employee engagement as it fosters cooperation and a positive work culture (Clack, 2021; Turner, 2020). Similar to Item 3, item 4 also has a mean score of 3.93, indicating that employees feel recognized and rewarded for their outstanding contributions to customer service. Employee recognition is an essential

component of morale-building, as it reinforces positive behavior and motivates staff (Eisenbeiss *et al.*, 2009).

The findings suggest that the hotel industry in PHALGA has effective practices in place to engage and build morale among its staff. Employees feel motivated, valued, and recognized for their contributions to customer service. Such positive perceptions can contribute to enhanced job satisfaction, increased morale, and ultimately, employee retention (Eisenbeiss *et al.*, 2009). The positive relationship between employee engagement and morale-building practices and customer patronage is well-established in the literature. Engaged and motivated employees are more likely to provide excellent service, which leads to increased customer satisfaction and loyalty (Heskett *et al.*, 2008). Therefore, these practices not only benefit employees but also have a direct impact on customer experiences and, consequently, patronage. The finding from this hypothesis showed a substantial and positive impact of employee engagement and morale building on customer patronage in the hotel industry in PHALGA. This outcome is consistent with the well-established service-profit chain theory, which suggests that engaged and satisfied employees lead to improved customer service and, subsequently, increased customer satisfaction and loyalty (Heskett *et al.*, 2008). Employee engagement is known to foster a positive work environment, which in turn affects the quality of service provided by employees (Eisenbeiss *et al.*, 2008). The finding is significant for the hotel industry in PHALGA as it underscores the importance of focusing on employee engagement and morale-building strategies. Engaged and motivated employees tend to be more committed and enthusiastic about their work, resulting in higher levels of customer service quality and enhanced guest experiences (Clack, 2021). This, in turn, contributes to higher customer retention, word-of-mouth recommendations, and repeat business. Moreover, the positive relationship between employee engagement and morale-building practices and customer patronage also has financial implications for hotels. Satisfied and loyal customers tend to spend more, making it a direct driver of revenue and profitability (Heskett *et al.*, 2008). These findings provide empirical support for the importance of investing in employee engagement and morale-building strategies as a means to enhance customer satisfaction and loyalty. Such strategies can be instrumental in maintaining and expanding a hotel's customer base.

## CONCLUSION

This study examined key aspects of employee training and development, empowerment, and engagement practices within the hotel industry in PHALGA. Findings show a positive perception of training, particularly in communication and interpersonal skills, which enhances service quality. Employee empowerment is seen positively but could improve in promoting independent initiatives. Employee engagement and morale-building practices, such as creating a positive work environment and recognizing contributions, positively affect employee morale and engagement. The research found a significant and positive link between HR practices and customer patronage, indicating that investments in these areas improve customer service, satisfaction, loyalty, and profitability. Hotel management in PHALGA should focus on enhancing training, empowering employees, and maintaining positive morale to attract and retain customers in this competitive industry.



## RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The hotel industry should develop customized training programs to address the specific needs and roles of employees within each hotel. In addition, the effectiveness of training programs should be continuously evaluated through feedback mechanisms. Employee input, performance evaluations, and guest feedback can serve as valuable resources for refining and adapting training content.
2. Employees in the hotel industry should be empowered by providing clear guidelines and boundaries within which they can make decisions to address customer needs promptly. Furthermore, hotel managers should recognize and reward employees who exhibit initiative and sound decision-making skills. Employee recognition reinforces the importance of empowerment and serves as an encouragement.
3. Employees should be actively involved in decision-making processes, seeking their input and feedback on matters affecting their roles and the guest experience. Creating opportunities for collaboration fosters a positive work environment and strengthens morale.

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