

CUSTOMER CARE PRACTICES AND CUSTOMER PATRONAGE OF TELECOMMUNICATIONS FIRMS IN PORT HARCOURT

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ABSTRACT

Gracious treatment will turn a customer into a walking advertisement, hence, the holy grail of many successful businesses is excellent customer care. This study examined the relationship between customer care practices and customer patronage of Telecommunications Firms in Port-Harcourt. The population of the study consists of the four (4) telecommunications firms in Port Harcourt. To achieve accuracy, the entire population was adopted as the sample size due to its small size. The study respondents were five (5) top management staff (General Managers, Marketing Managers, Relationship Managers, Customer Care Managers and Front Desk officers) from each of the firms making it a total of twenty (20) respondents. Data obtained via the questionnaire method were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics and the hypothesis was tested using Pearson product moment correlation with the aid of the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS version 22.0). From the analysis, it was found that the relationship between customer care practices and customer patronage was positive and statistically significant. Based on the findings, the study concludes that customer care practices are vital tools for achieving customer patronage. Therefore, the study recommends that, telecommunications firms in Port Harcourt should implement established social and ethical customer care practices in terms of etiquettes when handling customers before, during, and after all purchases to encourage repeat purchases and customer retention.

Keywords: Customer Care Practices, Customer Patronage, Repeat Purchase, Theory of Reasoned Action

INTRODUCTION

Typically, organizations that strive towards repeat purchase are considered superior. The manner in which a firm responds to customers and the efficiency with which it rectifies customers' related issues speaks volumes about the brand. Such organizations are market orientated. Market orientated organizations are committed to knowing about what customers both (internal and external) care about, as their ultimate goal is customer satisfaction and loyalty, it is essential for businesses to live up to customers' expectations, hence, customer care practices (Poi & Opara, 2021). Many markets around the world are moving towards a more market-orientated approach because customers have become more sophisticated and require better quality and more care (Studiowide 2023). Market orientation acts as an "organization's compass", the "life blood" of the marketing concept, steering firms to understand and satisfy consumers' needs and wants through organizational culture; perspectives, standards, beliefs, and structures (Chikere & Poi 2021). It is worth mentioning that being market orientated is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for topnotch marketing performance that it undergirds; it has to be combined with certain social and ethical customer care practices if it is to work properly. Customer care practices are therefore, imperative for businesses seeking survival, growth and higher patronage. According to Fontanella, (2022), customer care practices are activities that breed positive customer experiences and emotional connection with brands. Mercer, (2023) opined that organizations that focus on providing adequate customer care tend to grow faster, sometimes twice as fast as their competitors. As a result, customer care is fast becoming the factor which helps sustain competitive advantage of business organizations. Ng'ang'a,

Kepha & Iravo (2015) reveal that firms that care for their customers do better than their counterparts.

There is no question that the Nigerian telecommunications industry is Africa's most lucrative, where fierce competition exists among firms in Port Harcourt for their target markets' wallets and hearts. But if we presume that the competitiveness amongst firms in the industry is a precursor for customer care, we are flawed. Adepetun, (2019) reports that service providers in Nigeria are yet to recognise their customers as 'King' as they are not sufficiently cared for. According to Akingbade (2014), telecommunications firms still offer epileptic services to their customers irrespective of their exorbitant charges, incessant call blockage and poor network coverage have made it difficult for the customers to enjoy better services. There is obvious dissatisfaction among end users of telecommunications services with respect to the low quality of customer care provided for customers. This dissatisfaction can be sensed in the way customers easily shift their patronage between service providers. This is attributed to poor customer care, customers' access to cheap phones and "multi-SIMing"; some customers have different SIMs for different occasions, making it easier to defect (Kolawole & Umejei, 2018). There is therefore the need to investigate the relationship between customer care practices and customer patronage of telecommunications firms in Port Harcourt.

Furthermore, extant studies have concentrated on factors affecting customers of telecommunications firms in Port Harcourt while no known studies have established the relationship between customer care practices and customer patronage of telecommunications firms in Port Harcourt. Studies such as: Mwangi (2015), who examined organizational strategies for customer retention in the mobile telecommunication sector in Kenya. Dahie, Takow, Nur & Osman, (2016) studied organizational culture and employee performance at telecommunication firms in Mogadishu-Somalia. ZorBari-Nwitambu & Kalu (2017) investigated celebrity endorsement and customer loyalty in the telecommunications industry in Port Harcourt. Similarly, Okoisama, Best & Anyanwu, (2017) examined corporate image management and firm's competitive advantage: A study of the telecommunication industry in Port Harcourt. Furthermore, Nwoko, Eze & Maduka (2021) surveyed the effect of internal marketing on customer satisfaction with telecommunication companies in Anambra State. Promise, Igwe & Ozuru, (2022) investigated marketing communication strategies and customer satisfaction of e-tailing firms in Port Harcourt. Thus, this study attempted to fill this knowledge gap and allow telecommunications firms leverage its recommendations for their industry practices in managing all strata of clients. The conceptual framework in Figure 1 below shows the relationship between the research variables.

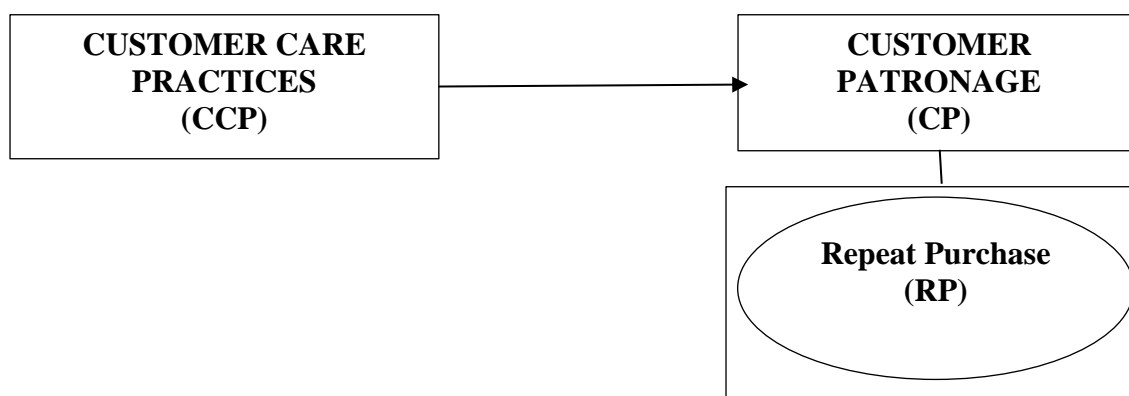


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework of the Relationship between Customer Care Practices and Customer Patronage of Telecommunications Firms in Port-Harcourt.

Source: Researchers' Conceptualization (2023) as Adapted From (Dick & Basu 1994).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Literature on the study variables is provided to offer an inclusive understanding of the constructs in the conceptual framework presented in Figure 1.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

The study took its bearing from the Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA) as its theoretical foundation.

THEORY OF REASONED ACTION (TRA)

The theory of reasoned action (TRA) is a cognitive and mathematical model introduced by psychologists Martin Fishbein and Icek Ajzen as an enhancement of the information integration theory (Nickerson & Mcleod, 2023). The theory of reasoned action (TRA) elucidates voluntary behaviour by individuals and the underlying motivation that drives their actions. The theory was established to suggest a better understanding of the relationship among attitudes, intention, which in turn is influenced by attitude towards the behaviour and the social normative perceptions regarding it (Fishbein, 1967; Ajzen, 2012). Doswell, Braxter, Cha, & Kim, (2011) opine that the primary objective of the (TRA) is to understand the voluntary behavior of individuals and organizations by exploring the underlying basic motivation for their actions. The operationalization of the theory of reasoned action (TRA) was developed from the attitude measurement theory rooted in the concept that attitude is influenced by expectations or beliefs concerning features of the object or action and evaluation of those features (Rashaduzzaman, 2020). Citing Fishbein & Ajzen (1975), Nickerson & Mcleod (2023) indicate that beliefs, attitudes, and the expectations of others predict behavioral intentions. Hence, the theory of reasoned action helps organizations to establish patterned ways of responding and adapting to their customers. In the context of this study, the (TRA) was adapted to reveal the measurements of attitudes that serve as precursors that eventually influence organizational decisions and actions towards providing care for customers based on their expectations.

CONCEPTUAL REVIEW

CONCEPT OF CUSTOMER CARE PRACTICES

In spite of the kind of business, industry and market offerings offered for sales, customers are the most crucial aspect of any business. The customers' preparedness to pay for products and services changes economic resources into wealth and ideas into goods and services (Bäuerle & Bäuerle, 2000). They are the "heart" of the business, and are considered the hardest to get and the easiest to lose if not handled carefully (Kotler 1994). This reflects the view of Ogwo & Igwe (2012), that the main reason for establishing a business is to create customers. In many cases, a customer is also a consumer when the consumer is the individual or organization is the end user of the product. Although, every so often, the customer is different from the consumer, for instance in households, parents frequently make purchase decisions for products and services that the children consume. A customer, also referred to as client or purchaser is a person or organization that purchases goods and services from another (Graf & Maas, 2008). Customer care means different things to different people Customer care practices describe etiquettes required for handling customers. This includes all experiences with a firm and its employees before, during, and after a purchase (Fontanella, 2022). In a broad sense, customer care is anything a company does for customers that enhances their experiences with the brand. Customer care can be defined as the totality of what an organization does to create value for the customers Machando & Diggines, (2013) as cited in (Jeske, Chimusoro, & Karodia, 2015). Customer care describes how customers are treated when they interact with a brand before, during, and after a purchase. It is the process of taking care of customers in a positive manner. It involves caring for customers, listening to their needs, and finding the right solutions to their problems and concerns (Fontanella, 2021).

Customer care practices are etiquettes, behavioral patterns and techniques used as a proactive approach to providing information, tools, products and services to customers at each point they interact with a brand (IBM, n.d). Customer care is focused on customer satisfaction; putting customers first, anticipating their needs and establishing profitable customer relationships are the easiest ways to succeed in business (Semerkant, 2021). According to Heath, (2022), exceptional customer service is achieved by following best practices like maintaining a positive attitude while interacting with customers, solving customers' problems promptly and creatively, offer personalised services, be reliable, value customers' time etc. These practices are anchored on the firm's capacity to meet customers' expectations in terms of safe and on time delivery (Poi, & Moko 2023). Through customer care practices firms can acquire new customers, satisfy and retain existing customers, build and maintain customer loyalty by tailoring their communications, market offerings based on customers' expectations. Customer care practices enable firms to identify and focus special attention on profitable customers and prospects (Aden & Gichinga 2016). An organization that cares for its customers builds credibility, competence and reliability.

CONCEPT OF CUSTOMER PATRONAGE

Patronage is the sustenance, help, opportunity, and financial aid that an organization or individual confers on another. Cambridge Dictionary (n.d) defined patronage as the support given to an organization by someone. In the context of marketing, patronage is an exchange process where one receives a good/service or goods in exchange for money or other considerations. Patronage is defined as the degree to which a customer exhibits repeat purchase behaviour from a service provider, possesses a positive, long-lasting attitude and disposition towards a service provider (Gremler & Brown, 1996). Customer patronage has been associated with different measures, they include; product and service quality, service environment, store choice, shopping experience, cost and merchandise value, location, merchandise and store atmosphere, access in store atmosphere and cross category product store assessment (Eze, Odigbo & Ufot 2015). However, Nwokah, & Poi (2016) opined that before a phenomenon is measured, it must be concisely defined to know what it is and what it is not.

Chiguvi (2016) defined customer patronage as the commitment to consistently purchase products and services from an organization. In agreement with Chiguvi, Mellroy & Barnett, (2000) as cited in (Almotairi, 2021) added that customer patronage is a term used to describe a customer's allegiance to a company; buying its products and services regularly and sharing positive reviews about the brand to others. Nkpurukwe, Amangala & Wali, (2020) indicate that customer patronage is the succour provided by customers to a particular brand in terms of constant purchase. Oliver (1999) as cited in Chow, Lau, Lo Sha & Yun, (2007) opined that customer patronage is a deeply held commitment to repurchase a firm's products at the expense of a competitor's offering. Seock (2009), described customer patronage as the repeat purchase behavior at a particular store for either the same products or any other products derived from the degree of customer satisfaction. According to Anderson & Sullivan (1993), a customer expectation of satisfaction leads to an increase in patronage tendencies. They reiterated that firms that provide high quality products and services on a regular basis will have more satisfied customers and these customers will likely re-patronize the service and products next time. These assertions are supported by Kivela, Inbakaran & Reece (1999), they indicate that comparatively, firms that offer goods and services of superior quality are bound to get their customers satisfied as well as get higher economic returns more than their competitors. Dick & Basu (1994) propose favorable attitude and repeat purchase as measures of customer patronage.

REPEAT PURCHASE

Repeat purchase, also referred to as "customer's repeat purchase", "repurchase or replacement sales" is when a customer acquires products and services from the same firm again (Dमित, Harun, Martin, Othman, & Ahmad, 2019). Repeat purchase is a term used to describe when a customer obtains the same product that replaces the previous purchase which makes the customer a "repeat customer" (Kumar 2018). Repeat purchases are when customers buy goods or services to substitute the same goods and services they bought previously (Indeed, 2023). According to (Fakeye & Crompton, 1991; Lichtenstein, Bloch, & Black, 1988) as cited in Aprihatiningrum, Ronny & Siti, (2020), repeat purchase only occurs when customers had positive previous buying and consumption experiences. It is often a measure of customer patronage, higher repeat purchase value means a well retained, satisfied customer base, also higher repeat purchase value drives higher customer value, which means a better top line in the loyalty ladder (Caudill & Murphy 2000). There is a thin line between first-time and repeat buyers, Donohoe, (2023) suggests that an easy way to work out a firm's repeat purchase rate is to divide the number of customers who bought more than once (in a given date range) by the total number of customers (in a given date range).

Repeat purchase is the duct for higher customer retention and loyalty rates and retaining an existing customer is more economical than acquiring a new one. According to Donohoe, (2023), existing and loyal customers have a sixty seven percent (67%) higher average order value than first-time customers. Repeat purchase is often a measure of customer loyalty to a brand. Higher repeat purchase value can also mean higher profitability as it does not include new customer acquisition costs. Repeat purchase is the prime goal a company can set for its products since it is a consumer reference to purchase a given brand in a product category. Customer repeat purchase is a good indicator of a long-term business sustainability and profitability of an organization; this is because it points to customer satisfaction and retention (Nwulu & Asiegbu, 2015).

EMPIRICAL REVIEW

Enhancement of customer care practices can be used to predict positive customer patronage. This position has been empirically validated by previous studies. Ng'ang'a, Kepha, & Mike (2013), investigated the effects of customer care strategies on customer satisfaction of firms in the telecommunications sector in Kenya. The study adopted a descriptive survey design utilizing both primary and secondary data. Structured and unstructured questionnaires were used to collect primary data which were administered as the customers queued in the customer service centers while secondary data was collected through document review. Data analysis was carried out using qualitative and quantitative techniques with the aid of Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) while the main method of data presentation was frequency distribution, tables, pie charts and bar graphs. The study found that there is a significant relationship between customer service strategies and customer satisfaction. Additionally, Iberahim, Taufik, Adzmir & Saharuddin, (2016) studied effect of customer satisfaction on reliability and responsiveness of self-service technology for retail banking services in Malaysia. Data were collected through questionnaire survey of two hundred and seventy-one (271) respondents and observations at the service point and using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) to analyse data. The result revealed that the relationships of three out of four elements of service quality dimensions (consistency, dependability and timeliness) are important to maximizing customer satisfaction and patronage. Bolumole, Grawe & Daugherty (2016) conducted a study on customer service responsiveness in logistics outsourcing contracts: the influence of job autonomy and role clarity among on-site representatives in Taiwan. Using survey research design, responses were collected from implants in a logistics setting to test the proposed relationships. The study found out that implants are given more autonomy in their job function and as the clarity of their roles increase; they are willing to become more responsive to customer needs. Furthermore, Reyes (2013) who carried out a research measures the impact of customer care of local government units of Angeles and San Fernando in the province of Papanga to ascertain the satisfaction level of their constituents using mean rating, correlation and T-test to test their null hypotheses. Reliability, assurance and empathy had a very strong linear relationship with the

constituents of the two local government units, while responsiveness and tangibles had a strong linear relationship. Nkpurukwe et al (2020) investigated the connection between mobile marketing strategies and customer patronage of mobile telecommunication services. The study adopted a cross-sectional survey design and obtained data from four hundred (400) telecom subscribers of MTN, Glo, Aitel, and 9 Mobile. The Spearman Rank Correlation Coefficient tool was used to test the research hypotheses with the aid of (SPSS) version 21.0. The results revealed a positive and significant relationship between mobile marketing strategies and customer patronage. We therefore state the research hypothesis as:

Ho₁: There is no significant relationship between customer care practices and repeat purchase of telecommunications firms in Port Harcourt.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study used a cross sectional survey research design to determine the relationship between the research variables. The target population comprised of the four (4) major mobile telecommunication firms operating in Port Harcourt according to the Nigeria Communication Commission (NCC) (2021). As illustrated in the table below;

Table 1: List of Mobile Telecommunication companies in Port Harcourt

S/n	Mobile Telecommunication	Location
1	Mobile Telecommunication Network(MTN)	Port Harcourt
2	Airtel	Port Harcourt
3	Global Com	Port Harcourt
4	9 Mobile	Port Harcourt

Source: Nigeria Communication Commission (NCC) (2021).

To achieve accuracy the entire population was adopted as the sample size due to its small size. The study respondents were five (5) top management staff from each of the firms making it a total of twenty (20) management staff of the telecommunication firms in Port Harcourt, they include; General Managers, Marketing Managers, Relationship Managers, Customer Care Managers and Front Desk officers. Twenty (20) copies of a well-structured questionnaire were randomly distributed to the target respondents to obtain data for the study. The content and construct validity of the research instrument was determined by marketing Pundits in the department of marketing, Rivers State University who examined the correctness of the questionnaire to see if it measures what it purposed to measure. The study also used the Cronbah Alpha Coefficient to ascertain the reliability of the research instrument with the aid of the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS version 22.0). The inclusive reliability alpha rate for the entire research instrument was 0.879; it endorses the internal consistency of the items in the questionnaire used in this study and past the threshold of 0.70 set according to Nunnally (1978) as cited in (Peterson,1994). Descriptive and inferential statistics methods of Pearson moment correlation was used to measure the relationship between the hypotheses already established also with the help of Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS version 22.0). As shown in the table below:

Table 2: The Gender Distribution of Respondents

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Male	13	65.0	65.0	65.0
Female	7	35.0	35.0	100.0
Total	20	100.0	100.0	

Source: Research Data , 2023 (SPSS Output, Version 22.0)

Table 2 shows that 13 (65%) of the respondents are males while 7 (35%) of the respondents are female which means that our respondents are mostly males.

Table 3: Years of Experience of Respondents in their respective Organizations

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid 0 - 5 years	3	15.0	15.0	15.0
6 - 10 years	5	25.0	25.0	40.0
11 -15 years	10	50.0	50.0	90.0
16 - 20 years	2	10.0	10.0	100.0
Total	20	100.0	100.0	

Source: Research Data , 2023 (SPSS Output, Version 22.0)

Table 3 shows that 3(15%) of the respondents had worked in the organization for 5 years or less, 5(25%) of the respondents had worked between 6 to 10 years, 10 (50%) of the respondents had been in their respective organizations for 11 to15 years and 2(10%) of the respondents have worked between 16 to 20 years.

Table 4: Respondents Distribution Showing Marital Status

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Married	17	85.0	85.0	85.0
Single	3	15.0	15.0	100.0
Total	20	100	100	

Source: Research Data , 2023 (SPSS output, version 22.0)

The table indicates that seventeen (17) respondents representing 85% of the total retrieved questionnaire were married while three (3) respondents representing 15% were single at the time of this research.

Hypotheses Testing and Bivariate Analysis

Only one hypothesis was formulated, and tested using the Pearson Product Moment Correlation to examine the relationship between customer care practices and customer patronage of telecommunications firms in Port Harcourt. These analyses were carried out with the aid of the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS version 23.0) based on Dunn's (2001) categorization model presented below:

Range of r values	Descriptive Level of relationship of r
± 0.80 to 1.00	Very Strong
± 0.60 to 0.79	Strong
± 0.40 to 0.59	Moderate
± 0.20 to 0.39	Weak
± 0.00 to 0.19	Very Weak

The Decision Rule that guides the test of hypotheses includes the following:

Level of Significance = 0.05.

Reject Null Hypothesis if Probability Value (p) < Level of Significance;

Accept Null Hypothesis if Probability Value (p) > Level of Significance.

TEST OF HYPOTHESIS 1 (Ho₁): There is no significant relationship between customer care practices and repeat purchase of telecommunications firms in Port Harcourt.

Table 1: Correlation between Reliability and Customer Retention

Variable	Statistics	Customer Care	
		Practices	Repeat Purchase
(CCP)	Pearson Correlation	1	.733**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	20	20
(RP)	Pearson Correlation	.733**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	20	20

Source: SPSS Output (2022)

The correlation table 1 for hypothesis one above shows the Pearson correlation coefficient (r) of which designates a robust, positive relationship between customer care practices and repeat purchase as ($r = 0.733$, $p < .05$) a Pearson correlation coefficient at 0.01 significant level. This relationship was significant at $p = 0.000$ which is less than the level of significance 0.05 accepted for the study. Thus, the stated null hypothesis is rejected and the alternate accepted; there is a significant relationship between customer care practices and repeat purchase of telecommunications firms in Port Harcourt.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The aim of this study was to determine the relationship between customer care practices and customer patronage of telecommunications firms in Port Harcourt. The result shows that customer care practices are significantly related to the prediction of customer patronage (repeat purchase = 0.733) of the selected firms examined. From this result, it is evident that customer care practices have a significant and positive relationship with customer patronage. This result is in consonance with Nkpurukwe et al (2020) who studied the connection between mobile marketing strategies and customer patronage of mobile telecommunication services and found a positive and significant relationship between mobile marketing strategies and customer patronage. Also, Reyes' (2013) findings also supported the findings of this study, where a T-test was done to test their null hypotheses and customer care practices (Reliability, assurance and empathy) were found to have very strong linear relationship with the constituents of the two local government units of Angeles and San Fernando in the province of Papanga. The findings of Iberahim et al (2016) also resonates with the findings of this study, they examined the effect of customer satisfaction on reliability and responsiveness of self-service technology for retail banking services in Malaysia and revealed consistency, dependability and timeliness are important to maximizing customer satisfaction and patronage.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study investigated the relationship between customer care practices and customer patronage of telecommunications firms in Port Harcourt. To accomplish the purpose of study, customer care practices was unidimensional (independent variable) and repeat purchase was the only measure of customer patronage (dependent variable) adopted. Data were collected, hypothesis analysed, findings made, and the study concluded that; that customer care practices are vital tools for achieving customer patronage. Therefore, the study recommends that, telecommunications firms in Port Harcourt should implement established social and ethical customer care practices in terms

of etiquettes when handling customers before, during, and after all purchases to encourage to repeat purchases and customer retention.

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