

**EFFECTIVE MARKETING STRATEGIES AND CUSTOMER PATRONAGE OF SMEs:
NAVIGATING BUSINESS IN A PANDEMIC**

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ABSTRACT

The study examined effective marketing strategies and customer patronage of SMEs: Navigating business in a pandemic. The study adopted the correlation research design. A sample of 660 respondents or staff selected from 330 Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs), out of the 1,200 registered Enterprises operating in Port Harcourt Rivers State, Nigeria participated in the study. A 40-item 2 marketing professionals or experts validated 4-point scale instrument titled "Pandemic Marketing Strategies and Customer Patronage Inventory" (PMSCPI) with a reliability coefficient of 0.841 was used to elicit data analyzed using regression analysis. The study revealed that: innovation, knowledge, and customer empathy statistically and significantly contributed 53.7%, 61.2%, and 32.9% respectively to customer loyalty of SMEs, while innovation, knowledge, and customer empathy statistically and significantly contributed 9.9%, 10.7%, and 6.3% respectively to customer retention of SMEs. Thus, among the recommendations is that: SMEs should adopt innovations (such as virtual advertising, home delivery, and shopping apps) as tactics for ensuring that their products and services reach, satisfy and influence their target customers continued loyalty and patronage. Alongside, SMEs are encouraged to effectively, timely and humanely engage, respond, communicate, sensitize and meet the changing customer needs for improved retention.

Keywords: Marketing strategies, customer patronage, SMEs, pandemic, Port Harcourt metropolis.

INTRODUCTION

Businesses operate in environments susceptible to activities that significantly ignite intense changes that could enhance, retard, stifle or shrink their sales, patronage, and profitability including transforming their business operational strategies. As such an emergency or crisis situation (like the COVID-19 Pandemic) can affect organizations (i.e. small medium and big) through the disruption of operations, plans, and modus operandi based on the ensuing protocols (restrictions, closures, lockdowns, quarantines etc.), measures and reactions for tackling a pandemic. Motti (2020) sees COVID-19 as a coronary disease and fast spreading global invasive pandemic that influences individuals, organizations, and Governments welfare, routine and functions respectively, thereby, compelling them to responsively re-strategizing and altering their pattern for maneuvering and navigating an business environment based on the emerging experiences and challenges on what is termed the "new normal" in the society.

In specificity, businesses (manufacturing firms) amid a pandemic are also re-strategizing, rebuilding and redesigning all tactics, ideas or procedures through stocking products and delivering services in conformity with the trends (i.e. new normal) in order to thrive, survive and continually positioned to maintaining their trademark even during a catastrophic and economic repellant situation (COVID-19). Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) are businesses (services, logistics, trading, etc.) with limited capital base, small workforce, and little or no share base but with the capacity to provide jobs, goods and services that compete with foreign products in the market (Rijkers, 2014). The Central Bank of Nigeria defines SMEs based on criteria as asset base (between 5 to 500 million naira) and staff strength (between 11 and 100 employees) (CBN,

2010). This leaves SMEs with minor holding and lean capital base businesses often requiring Governments intervention programmes like financing, trainings, and internship for acquiring the needed capacity and knowledge for growth and survival (Petrakis & Kostis, 2012).

Agwu and Emeti (2014) view SMEs as the vehicle for the conglomeration of labour intensive and capital saving entrepreneurial prospects and ventures for the intent of alleviating poverty and creating jobs towards the economic empowerment and equitable development of the nation's economy. Also, SMEs provides the means for reducing income disparities and developing pool of skilled and semi-skilled workers discharging services in support of industrial and economic growth. Nkwor-Azariah and Nkwor (2016) states that "support" is a vital performance tool aiding SMEs fronted with poor infrastructure (such as epileptic power, rising cost of good internet service, logistics, etc.), uncertain access to growth finance, and other challenges to effectively navigate the business environment whilst retaining their brand or product loyalty and customer patronage

Consumer patronage entails the level of consent or support expressed in order to stir customers' exhibition of repurchase or repeat intention and satisfaction towards using a brand or product (Anetoh & Moguluwa, 2018). The extent of patronage is stimulated by customer's behavioural, attitudinal and psychological commitment and willingness to incur extra cost towards repurchasing a brand or product amidst other alternatives (Perutkova & Parsa, 2010). Ayodele (2016) reiterate that customer patronage is measured by the number of brands purchased, ratio of purchases, and future purchase intention exhibited towards a brand even in the midst of change in quality and price. Also, customer patronage inspires consumer loyalty and retention as conceptualized in this study, to expectedly help SMEs build their brand or products, grow their market share, sales, and revenue, promptly deliver services, and create marketing improvement strategies.

Marketing is the heart of strategies for attaining business goals and growth. James (2020) sees marketing strategy as a business overall game plan or blueprint for getting the interest of potential consumers and turning them into loyal customers of the products or services provided by such business (SMEs). Also, the adoption of proactive marketing strategies would enhance swift response to complaints, trustworthiness, adaptability, innovativeness, reasonable charges and friendliness of staff promptly delivering their products and services that enhances their value and competitive advantage (Aregbeyen, 2011). Adach (2020) stated that marketing strategies is a time sensitive issue requiring businesses to understand ways to reevaluate their strategies and innovate platforms for display and delivery of their goods and services during a pandemic (as COVID-19) where businesses are on restriction or lockdown. Omowunmi and Idowu (2020) stated that SMEs needs to resiliently and swiftly reinvent their strategies in crisis period or be stifled out of the market.

Furthermore, the restrictions against the physical operation of businesses in a pandemic which affected supply chain stirred the innovative adoption and use of technological or online platforms (like WhatsApp, Instagram, etc.), and mobile shopping devices or apps for displaying, requesting and purchasing products (Meyer, 2020). This intensified SMEs integration of new ideas and techniques for creatively delivering service towards winning customer's loyalty, retention and patronage as measures of business competitiveness, growth, profitability and sustainability (Akintemi, 2020). Alongside, other ingenious strategies designed to advertise products and services, receive payments, and transfer money to clients, creditors and banks or organizations, including after sales quick and reliable service delivery via dispatchers (Adiele, 2018). Hence, the crux of this study.

Statement of the Problem

SMEs are established for survival based on the patronage (via sales) of its services and products by customers in order to grow their limited capital base, else they would become insolvent and unable to achieve its dreams/goals of continued operation and profit, which would in turn impact the state and country's economy. In particular, SMEs are challenged by faulty access to financial incentives which suffices as the main stimulus package driving the supposedly great ideas, techniques, proficiency, exemplary leadership, and charisma possessed by SMEs operators (Akintemi, 2020). Thus, limited capital base could affect SMEs proactively synthesizing openings for redesigning services and restocking products innovatively and excellently delivered in line with pandemic induced ingenious marketing strategies to stir customers reminiscence, loyalty, retention and repurchase, which are among the business (like SMEs) growth and sustainability parameters.

Although, SMEs engaged in manufacturing, trading, processing, etc. have been gasping for breath based on challenges (such as porosity of funds, non-disbursement or diversion of stimulus packages, etc.) that are hindering their performance (Agwu, 2014), and crystallizing to their oblivion or extinction of for instance, 834 enterprises permanently closed in Rivers State between 2009 and 2014 (Josiah, Ozele & Agbo, 2016) even before the pandemic. Indeed, the pandemic requires SMEs ingenuity to devise strategies for their survival, profitability, and sustainability. Instructively, a carefully-cultivated marketing strategy is fundamentally rooted in an enterprises value proposition, increased patronage and competitive advantage. Yet, fund could constrain businesses from breaking-even amidst the high volatile business environment fraught with uncertain financial incentive, high operating costs, and lack of stimulus package that chokes and affects survival of many SMEs that are heavily depending on increased customer patronage (via loyalty and retention) of their services and products especially in a pandemic (like COVID-19).

Furthermore, the remote, restricted and closed work guidelines during crisis and pandemic requires SMEs to reprioritize and discover captivating marketing strategies such as innovation, knowledge and consumer empathy, i.e. trustworthy, upright, edifying, etc. (Adach, 2020). That can profitably and competitively position brands, store or outlets (i.e. SMEs) capably disposed to innovatively tackle complexities and challenges for achieving the expansion (i.e. size and capital), viability and continued operation of SMEs during and beyond the COVID-19 era. Previous studies focused on the performance status of small and medium scale enterprises in Rivers State (Nkwor-Azariah & Nkwor, 2016). Also Omowunmi and Idowu (2020) examined the marketing perspectives for reinventing business post COVID-19. However, not much study was directed towards integrating pandemic responsive marketing strategies for the survival of Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs). It is based on this premise that this study examined effective marketing strategies and consumer patronage of SMEs: Navigating businesses in a pandemic.

Specifically, the objectives of this study were to determine:

1. the contribution of innovation to customer loyalty of SMEs.
2. the contribution of innovation to customer retention of SMEs
3. the contribution of knowledge to customer loyalty of SMEs.
4. the contribution of knowledge to customer retention of SMEs.
5. the contribution of customer empathy to customer loyalty of SMEs.
6. the contribution of customer empathy to customer retention of SMEs.

The following research questions guided this study:

1. What is the contribution of innovation to customer loyalty of SMEs?
2. What is the contribution of innovation to customer retention of SMEs?
3. What is the contribution of knowledge to customer loyalty of SMEs?
4. What is the contribution of knowledge to customer retention of SMEs?
5. What is the contribution of customer empathy to customer loyalty of SMEs?

6. What is the contribution of customer empathy to customer retention of SMEs?

Fig. 1.1: Conceptual Framework

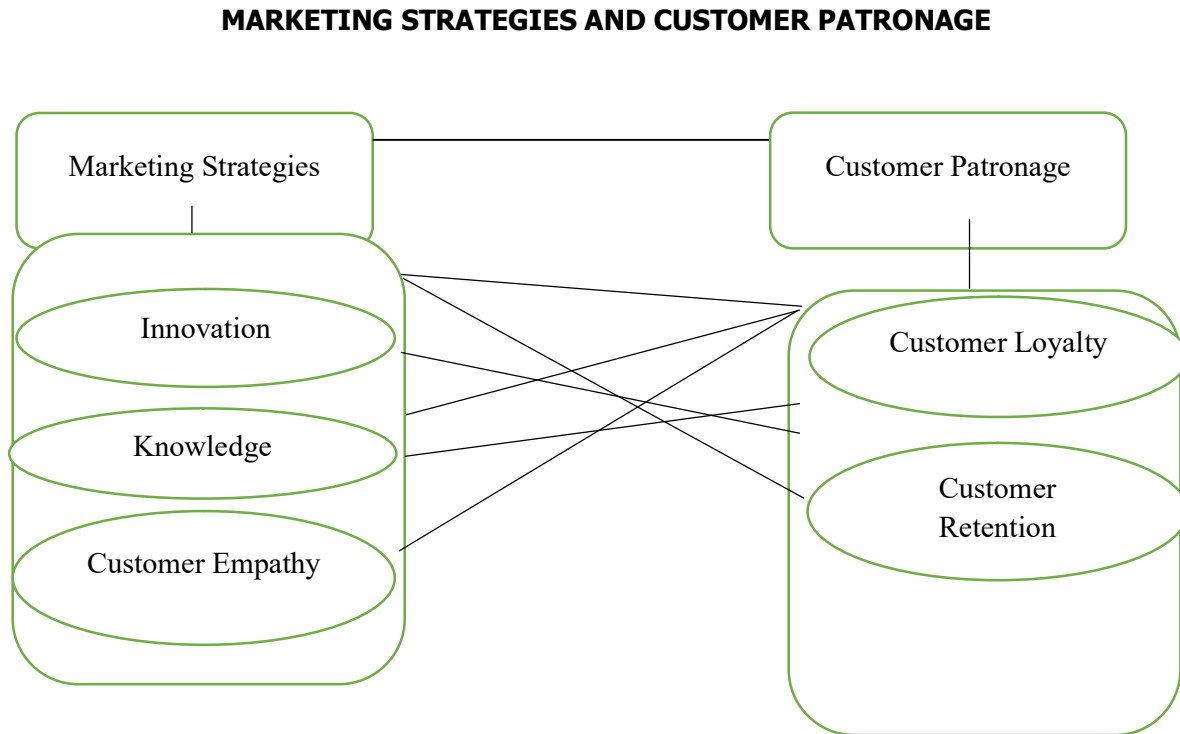


Fig. 1: Conceptual Model of Marketing Strategies and Customer Patronage
Source: Researcher's Review of Related Literature (2020)

METHODOLOGY

Research Design: The study was a quantitative research that adopted the correlational research design. Nwankwo (2013) stated that the correlation research establishes the relationship between two or more variables in order to find out the effect of the independent variable (i.e. marketing strategies) on the dependent variable (i.e. consumer patronage). In this study the independent variable with dimensions (like innovation, knowledge and consumer empathy) was examined with the dependent variable with measures (like consumer loyalty and consumer retention).

Study Area: This study was specifically carried out mainly in Port Harcourt (comprising Port Harcourt City and Obio-Akpor Local Government Areas), Rivers State (South-South Nigeria) where the 1,200 registered Enterprises (otherwise SMEs) are operating and providing services to the population of 157,791,115 persons (Josiah *et al.*, 2016; Rivers State Ministry of Commerce and Industry, 2019).

Population for the Study: The population for the study comprised of all the proprietors and staff in all the SMEs operating in Port Harcourt Rivers State, Nigeria.

Sample and Sampling Technique: A sample of 660 respondents or staff from 330 Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) participated in the study. The study adopted a three phase multistage sampling technique. Firstly, stratified sampling technique was used in the delimitation of Port Harcourt into twenty-two (22) strata classification via: Borokiri, Town/Old GRA, Marine Base, Rumuola-Rumuokwuota, Mgbuoba, Choba, D/Line, Ogbunabali, Mile 1, Mile 2, Mile 3,

Rumuolumeni, Rumueme, New GRA, Rumuomasi, Elekahia, Rumuokoro, Agip, Olu Obasanjo, Rumuogba, Elemenwo, and Woji strata. In the second phase, random sampling technique was used in the selection of fifteen (15) SMEs (manufacturing, trading, processing, skilled and unskilled servicing, etc. outlets or firms) from each of the 22 strata classification totaling to 330 SMEs from this exercise. Thirdly, and finally, purposive sampling technique was used in the selection of 2 staff or respondent from each of the 330 SMEs operating in the 22 strata classification in the study area. This constituted a sample of 660 respondents or staff (comprising 2 staff from each of the 330 SMEs selected from each of the 22 strata classification of the Port Harcourt) that was used for the study.

Instrumentation: The study sourced both primary and secondary data. The primary data was sourced from a self-structured 40-item instrument titled "Pandemic Marketing Strategies and Customer Patronage Inventory" (PMSCPI). The PMSCPI instrument was patterned after a four point rating scale of "Very High Contribution" (VHC, 4 Points), "High Contribution" (HC, 3 Points), "Low Contribution" (LC, 2 Points), and "Very Low Contribution" (VLI, 1 Point). Furthermore, the PMSCPI instrument consists of three sections. Section A elicited the demographics of the respondents (i.e. staff of SMEs), Section B comprised of the 24 items variables on marketing strategies (via 8 each for innovation, knowledge, and customer empathy), while Section C comprised 16 items on customer patronage (via 8 each for customer loyalty and customer retention). Furthermore, the secondary data was sourced from text books, articles, manuals, documents, magazines, dictionaries, and other publications.

Validation of Instrument: The face and content validity of the PMSCPI instrument was determined by two (2) experts (comprising. 1 Marketer in University of Port Harcourt, and the other 1 from Ignatius Ajuru University of Education). These validates prior to the commencement of their validation, were presented with the topic, objectives and research questions of this study for their comments, suggestions, and views towards improving the PMSCPI instrument validity.

Reliability of the Instrument: The reliability or internal consistency of the PMSCPI instrument was ascertained using Cronbach Alpha (r_a) method. In doing this 50 copies of the PMSCPI instrument was administered to 50 staff of SMEs in Aba, Abia State (which was not used for the study). Then 50 copies of the PMSCPI instrument were administered to the respondents and upon completion was retrieved, coded and analyzed using the Cronbach Alpha (r_a) method to obtain a reliability coefficient of .841, which necessitated using the PMSCPI instrument for administration.

Method of Data Collection: The face-to-face direct delivery technique was adopted by the researcher and three research assistants for the administration of the PMSCPI instrument to all the 660 respondents. Out of the 660 copies of the PMSCPI instrument administered to the respondents or staff of SMEs, only 608 copies (representing approximately 92% return rate) were validly retrieved and used for the analysis.

Method of Data Analysis: The collected data were scored, tabulated, coded, and analyzed using multiple linear regression analysis to answer the research questions through the SPSS 23.0.

RESULTS

Research Question 1: What is the contribution of innovations to consumer loyalty of SMEs?

Table 1: Summary of Multiple Linear Regression Analysis on the contribution of innovations to consumer loyalty of SMEs

Source	Sum of Squares (SS)	Df	Mean Square	F. Ratio	P-value	Remark
Regression	1635.094	1	1635.094	246.039	.000 ^b	S
Residual	3542.805	606	6.646			
Total	5662.367	607				

Multiple R (r_p) = .537^a
 R. Square (r^2) = .280
 Adjusted R² = .288
 Standard Error of Estimate = 2.57792

- a. Dependent Variable: Customer Loyalty
- b. Predictors: (Constant), Innovation

Table 1 shows that the use of innovation to predict the customer loyalty of SMEs in Port Harcourt Rivers State Nigeria yielded a coefficient of multiple regression R (r_p) of 0.537 and multiple regression square (R^2) of 0.280. This also the value of P is less than 0.05 (i.e. P is less than 0.05). This shows that innovation accounted for 53.7 percent of the variance in customer loyalty of SMEs in Port Harcourt. In other words, approximately 54% of the variance in the change in customer loyalty of SMEs in Port Harcourt Rivers State Nigeria can be explained by pulling the different variables together. This implies that 46% of the variation in the customer loyalty in SMEs cannot be explained by the variables of innovation alone. Thus, there must be other variables.

Research Question 2: What is the contribution of innovation to consumer retention of SMEs?

Table 2: Summary of Multiple Linear Regression Analysis on the contribution of innovation to consumer retention of SMEs

Source	Sum of Squares (SS)	Df	Mean Square	F. Ratio	P-value	Remark
Regression	545.176	1	545.176	66.275	.000 ^b	S
Residual	4984.903	606	8.226			
Total	5530.079	607				

Multiple R (r_p) = .314^a
 R. Square (r^2) = .099
 Adjusted R² = .097
 Standard Error of Estimate = 2.86809

- a. Dependent Variable: Customer Retention
- b. Predictors: (Constant), Innovation

Table 2 shows that the innovation to predict the customer retention of SMEs in Port Harcourt Rivers State Nigeria yielded a coefficient of multiple regression R (r_p) of 0.314 and multiple regression square (R^2) of 0.099. This also shows that F is 66.275 which is significant at $P < 0.05$. This shows that innovation accounted for 9.9 percent of the variance in customer retention of SMEs in Port Harcourt Rivers State Nigeria. In other words, approximately 10% of the variance in the change in customer retention of SMEs can be explained by pulling the different variables together. This means that 90% of the variation in the customer retention of SMEs in Port Harcourt cannot be explained by the variables of innovation alone. Thus, there must be other variables.

Research Question 3: What is the contribution of knowledge on consumer loyalty of SMEs?

Table 3: Summary of Multiple Linear Regression Analysis on the contribution of knowledge to consumer loyalty of SMEs

Source	Sum of Squares (SS)	Df	Mean Square	F. Ratio	P-value	Remark
Regression	2119.562	1	2119.562	362.562	.000 ^b	S
Residual	3542.805	606	5.846			
Total	5662.367	607				

Multiple R (r_p) = .612^a
 R. Square (r^2) = .374
 Adjusted R² = .373
 Standard Error of Estimate = 2.41789

- a. Dependent Variable: Customer Loyalty
- b. Predictors: (Constant), Knowledge

Table 3 shows that the use of knowledge to predict the customer loyalty of SMEs in Port Harcourt Rivers State Nigeria yielded a coefficient of multiple regression R (r_p) of 0.612 and multiple regression square (R^2) of 0.374. This also shows that F is 362.562 which is significant at $P < 0.05$. This shows that knowledge accounted for 61.2 percent of the variance in customer loyalty of SMEs in Port Harcourt Rivers State Nigeria. In other words, approximately 61% of the variance in the change in customer loyalty of SMEs can be explained by pulling the different variables together. This means that 39% of the variation in the customer loyalty of SMEs in Port Harcourt cannot be explained by the variables of knowledge alone. Thus, there must be other variables.

Research Question 4: What is the contribution of knowledge to consumer retention of SMEs?

Table 4: Summary of Multiple Linear Regression Analysis on the contribution of knowledge to consumer retention of SMEs

Source	Sum of Squares (SS)	Df	Mean Square	F. Ratio	P-value	Remark
Regression	589.124	1	589.124	72.255	.000 ^b	S
Residual	4940.955	606	8.153			
Total	5530.079	607				

Multiple R (r_p) = .326^a
 R. Square (r^2) = .107
 Adjusted R² = .105
 Standard Error of Estimate = 2.85541

- a. Dependent Variable: Customer Retention
- b. Predictors: (Constant), Knowledge

Table 4 shows that the use of knowledge to predict the customer retention of SMEs in Port Harcourt Rivers State Nigeria yielded a coefficient of multiple regression R (r_p) of 0.326 and multiple regression square (R^2) of 0.107. This also shows that F is 72.255 which is significant at $P < 0.05$. This shows that knowledge accounted for 10.7 percent of the variance in customer retention of SMEs in Port Harcourt Rivers State Nigeria. In other words, approximately 11% of the variance in the change in customer retention of SMEs can be explained by pulling the different variables together. This means that 89% of the variation in the customer retention of SMEs in Port Harcourt cannot be explained by the variables of knowledge alone. Thus, there must be other variables.

Research Question 5: What is the contribution of customer empathy to consumer loyalty of SMEs?

Table 5: Summary of Multiple Linear Regression Analysis on the contribution of customer empathy to consumer loyalty of SMEs

Source	Sum of Squares (SS)	Df	Mean Square	F. Ratio	P-value	Remark
Regression	1863.601	1	1863.601	297.292	.000 ^b	S
Residual	3798.765	606	6.269			
Total	5662.367	607				
Multiple R (r_p) = .574 ^a R. Square (r^2) = .329 Adjusted R ² = .328 Standard Error of Estimate = 2.50372						

- a. Dependent Variable: Customer Loyalty
- b. Predictors: (Constant), Customer Empathy

Table 5 shows that the use of customer empathy to predict the customer loyalty of SMEs in Port Harcourt Rivers State Nigeria yielded a coefficient of multiple regression R (r_p) of 0.574 and multiple regression square (R^2) of 0.329. This also shows that F is 297.292 which is significant at $P < 0.05$ because the value of P is less than 0.05. This shows that customer empathy accounted or contributed for 32.9 percent of the variance in customer loyalty of SMEs in Port Harcourt Rivers State Nigeria. In other words, approximately 33% of the variance in the change in customer loyalty of SMEs can be explained by pulling the different variables together. This means that 67% of the variation in the customer loyalty of SMEs in Port Harcourt cannot be explained by the variables of customer empathy alone. Thus, there must be other variables.

Research Question 6: What is the contribution of customer empathy to consumer retention of SMEs?

Table 6: Summary of Multiple Linear Regression Analysis on the contribution of customer empathy to consumer retention of SMEs

Source	Sum of Squares (SS)	Df	Mean Square	F. Ratio	P-value	Remark
Regression	350.507	1	350.507	41.009	.000 ^b	S
Residual	5179.572	606	8.547			
Total	5530.079	607				
Multiple R (r_p) = .252 ^a R. Square (r^2) = .063 Adjusted R ² = .062 Standard Error of Estimate = 2.92355						

- a. Dependent Variable: Customer Retention
- b. Predictors: (Constant), Customer Empathy

Table 6 shows that the use of customer empathy to predict the customer retention of SMEs in Port Harcourt Rivers State Nigeria yielded a coefficient of multiple regression R (r_p) of 0.252 and multiple regression square (R^2) of 0.063. This also shows that F is 41.009 which is significant at P

< 0.05 because the value of P is less than 0.05. This shows that customer empathy contributed or accounted for 6.3 percent of the variance in customer retention of SMEs in Port Harcourt Rivers State Nigeria. In other words, approximately 6% of the variance in the change in customer retention of SMEs can be explained by pulling the different variables together. This means that 94% of the variation in the customer retention of SMEs in Port Harcourt cannot be explained by the variables of customer empathy alone. Thus, there must be other variables.

Discussion of Findings

The result in Table 1 revealed that innovation statistically and significantly contributed to customer loyalty of SMEs in Port Harcourt Rivers State Nigeria. This finding is in agreement with Gursoy and Chi (2020) that a pandemic (like COVID-19) calls for the adoption of innovation (like digital marketing, shopping apps, etc.) in the service delivery concepts, ideas or techniques in order for businesses to meet with the customers changing inclinations, leanings, demands and purchases or buying behaviours of goods and services. Corroborating this view, Pesach (2020) stated that crisis or pandemic provides opportunities for the adoption of persuasive, innovative, and effective marketing strategies or approaches that can instill customers continued loyalty, purchase and patronage which would enhance the growth and performance of businesses.

The result in Table 2 revealed that innovation statistically and significantly contributed to customer retention in SMEs of Port Harcourt Rivers State Nigeria. This finding conforms to the views of Adach (2020) that innovation (via improved branding, flexible shopping and timely delivery) stems as an appealing marketing strategy that would edify and fortify customers retaining a brand or product and service. This is capable of improving the sales, profit, capital base and performance of SMEs that are confronted with survival strategies in and post-pandemic era.

The result in Table 3 revealed that knowledge statistically and significantly contributed to customer loyalty of SMEs in Port Harcourt Rivers State Nigeria. This finding is consistent with earlier findings by Kalsi (2020) that knowledge of the need for flexibility, and shifting priorities suffices as the requisite marketing plan, approach and strategy and an indication of marketers and business operators creativity or ingenuity in meeting customers changing purchasing pattern, behaviours and expectations during crisis or pandemic situation is a vital in showing. Meyer (2020) assert that this marketing strategies would help businesses (like SMEs) to ensure their brand, product and services reaches their target clients or customers whose dedication or loyalty and patronage would increase SMEs performance, profitability and productivity whilst navigating through crisis or pandemic period.

The result in Table 4 revealed that knowledge statistically and significantly contributed to customer retention of SMEs in Port Harcourt Rivers State Nigeria. This finding aligns with the position of Pesach (2020) that awareness or familiarity with customer's crisis-induced purchasing pattern of products and services, is a demonstration of marketers and businesses commitment to retaining their customers and increased profiteering thereby, surmounting challenges that are tantamount to putting them out of business during and after COVID-19.

The result in Table 5 revealed that customer empathy statistically and significantly contributed to customer loyalty of SMEs in Port Harcourt Rivers State Nigeria. This finding is in agreement with earlier findings by Onyinyechukwu (2020) that aligning towards customer empathy (via honesty, uprightness, educative, etc.) is a proficient post-COVID-19 recovery marketing strategies that positions SMEs strengthened in all the phase of the business value-chain including making customers to always put their trust in the brand, product and service offered or marketed by SMEs. This would position SMEs profitable and competitive while navigating business

stifling situations (like COVID-19 pandemic) with plans to meet customers changing needs and purchases.

The result in Table 6 revealed that customer empathy statistically and significantly contributed to customer retention of SMEs in Port Harcourt Rivers State Nigeria. This finding is consistent with Rumack (2020) that customer empathy (via friendly message, humane appeal, sharing credible tips, offering rebates, prompt response to complaints, etc.) is a mindful, persuasive, smart, and proactive marketing strategies or measures engaged by SMEs in order to competitively and successfully navigating a crisis or pandemic situation (like COVID-19) whilst delivering services that would facilitate customer retention or repeat purchase.

CONCLUSION

The study concludes that SMEs adoption of effective marketing strategies (dimensioned via: innovation, knowledge and customer empathy) contributed to customer patronage (measured via customer loyalty and customer retention). This was through the hands-on information or specifics on customers changing needs (like households, decontaminators, health kits/materials, groceries, etc.) in order to improve SMEs productivity and survival in Port Harcourt, Rivers State, Nigeria, and global business environment impacted by the pandemic.

Furthermore, SMEs or small businesses adoption of resilience, agile and flexible marketing strategies suffices as a way of retaining their customers whose loyalty would expand the marketing and advertising threshold of products and services that would help businesses effectively, profitably and competitively adjust during crisis or pandemic. Therefore, marketing strategies was found to facilitate SMEs maintenance of customer patronage while navigating a pandemic (like COVID-19) that have stifled, choked or disrupted businesses (like SMEs) not minding their immense role in the manpower development, and stimulating the economy and export growth of the nation.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. SMEs should adopt innovations (such as virtual advertising, home delivery, and shopping apps) as tactics for ensuring that their products and services reach, satisfy and influence their target customers continued loyalty and patronage.
2. Operators of SMEs should improve their knowledge of understanding, predicting and quickly switching and stocking the changing needs and purchasing patterns of customers in order to enhance their profit and survival during pandemic.
3. Businesses should provide opportunities for regularly interacting, communication, reaching out, and winning customer's loyalty as a support towards navigating the pressure and challenges caused by crisis or pandemic.
4. Government should assist SMEs discover modern and captivating innovations of delivering products and services in a way that it meets their goal of retaining and growing their customer base.
5. SMEs are encouraged to increase their understanding and meeting customers changing purchasing and consumption behaviour in order to overcome the reduced sales and other challenges to businesses patronage and profitability during the COVID-19 pandemic.

6. SMEs are encouraged to effectively, timely and humanely engage, respond, communicate, sensitize and meet the changing customer needs for improved retention and repeat purchase of products.

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