Original Research Report

Relationship Marketing and Customer Loyalty in Chain Fast Food Establishments in Umuahia, Abia State, Nigeria

Iheanyi B. Anyanwu[1]*, Margaret N. Ezeaku[2], Callister O. Ogboagha[3]

[1]Department of Hospitality Management and Tourism, Michael Okpara University of Agriculture, Umudike, Abia State, Nigeria
[2]Department of Home Economics and Hospitality Management Education, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, Enugu State, Nigeria
[3]Department of Hospitality and Tourism Management, Akanu Ibiam Federal Polytechnic Uwanna Afikpo, Ebonyi State, Nigeria

*Correspondence: Iheanyi B. Anyanwu, Department of Hospitality Management and Tourism, Michael Okpara University of Agriculture, Umudike, Nigeria (E-mail: ibbanyanwu@gmail.com)

Abstract: This study focused on the influence of relationship marketing on customer loyalty in chain fast food establishments in Umuahia, Abia State. Specifically, the study determined the influence of trust on brand attachment; relationship commitment on brand advocacy; service quality on customer patronage, and customer knowledge management on customer experience. Customers of chain fast food establishments in the study area formed the population while the sample size was made up of 200 customers drawn from chain fast food establishments operating in the study area. The research instrument used for data collection was a questionnaire. Descriptive and inferential statistics on SPSS version 23 were used to analyze the data generated. Findings revealed that trust has a positive influence on brand attachment (R=0.321); relationship commitment has a significant influence on brand advocacy (R=0.715); service quality has a positive influence on customer patronage (R=0.459); and customer knowledge management has a significant influence on customer experience (R=0.659, R^2=0.435). In view of the findings, the study concluded that relationship marketing has a positive relationship with customer loyalty and therefore recommends that operators of chain fast food establishments should build trust, fulfill promises made to customers, target continuous improvement in service quality, and develop database and other social media platforms for proper customer knowledge management as all these contribute in developing a good relationship with the customers leading to customer loyalty.

Keywords: Commitment, Customer, Loyalty, Marketing, Quality, Relationship, Service, Trust

1. Introduction

Business managers are beginning to appreciate the fact that attracting new customers is becoming not only costly but also difficult by the day particularly with the reality of the fierce competition that defines the business milieu nowadays. Every business organization should strive to satisfy the customer for it to remain competitive. Customer satisfaction as an antecedent to customer loyalty should be the ultimate target of any serious business firm. In the words of Dambush (2016), customer relationship marketing has emerged as a strategy that most business organizations have embraced. Business organizations are now moving away from a more transactional approach to customer treatment to a more encompassing approach which covers the kind of relationship that is maintained with the customers (Doaei et al., 2011) and it has attracted a lot of attention among researchers who are of the opinion that satisfying customers without achieving customer loyalty might not guarantee long term business success (Abtin & Pouramiri, 2016; Bataineh, et al., 2015). Modern day business environment is not only complex but full of potential challenges that tend to hinder the roles that organizations play in creating lasting loyalty in the minds of their customers. Observations have shown, however, that customers tend to defect or switch loyalty with regards to any instance of disloyalty experienced from any organizations (Ugwu & Enna, 2015). Relationship with customers is no longer what it used to be, as competition has increased the intensity for customer acquisition and has therefore advanced as a new pattern due to change in focus from customer acquisition to customer loyalty (Ibenwa, 2014). Hence, marketing practitioners around the world contend that acquiring new customers could be more expensive and not more instrumental in achieving long term success, but retaining and making current customers happy ensures long term success (Zegeye et al., 2009).

Relationship marketing is seen as a long-term continuous series of transactions between companies and their customers which occur when each trusts the other to deal fairly, reliably, and carefully. In the increasingly competitive fast-food sector, relationship marketing is being advocated as an excellent way to establishing a unique long-term relationship with customers. It is seen as a strategy to overcome service intangibility and it is appropriate for "credence" services, that is, services that are difficult for customers to evaluate even after patronage and use (Abtin & Pouramiri, 2016; Bataineh, et al., 2015). In service domain, loyalty has been conceptualized in an extensive form such as "observed behaviors"; these behavioural expressions relate to the brand not just thoughts (Anyanwu & Ohwobevughe, 2021). Largely, it is difficult to advance a universal definition of customer loyalty as it has been defined and measured in a myriad of ways too numerous for a single study to completely discuss. From a general viewpoint, loyalty can be described as the response that consumers demonstrate to brands, services, stores, or product categories (Zegeye et al. 2009). Many constructs have been used in anterior studies to assess customer loyalty such as brand attachment, affection, passion, captivated, advocacy, repeat purchase, customer experience, among others (Fullerton, 2011; Lariviere et al., 2014; Zegeye et al. 2009).However, this present study considered brand attachment, brand advocacy, customer experience, and customer patronage as parameters (indicators) of measuring customer loyalty. Previous studies have revealed that brand attachment, brand advocacy, brand association, repeat patronage, among others can be serious indicators of customer loyalty (Baker & Crompton, 2000).

Findings of some anterior studies suggest that relationship marketing can influence customer satisfaction and loyalty (Cousens, 2006;Doaei et al., 2011; Kirby, 2004). Constructs such as trust, commitment, communication, customer value, customer experience, product/service quality, customer knowledge management, among others have been used successfully in previous studies to measure

relationship (Baker & Crompton, 2000; Ndubisi, 2004). A study by Taleghani, Gilaninia, and Mousavian (2011) determined the role of relationship marketing in customer orientation process in the banking industry in Iran with focus on loyalty in which 384 bank customers were used as respondents. Findings revealed that all the underpinnings of relationship marketing; trust, complaint handling, commitment, reliability, among others can predict a good proportion of the variance in customer loyalty. Findings of later studies by Abdullah, Putit, and Chui (2014),Abtin and Pouramiri (2016), Bataineh et al. (2015), Muhammad, Huma, and Tahir (2017) and Nauroozi, and Morghadam (2015) carried out in different sectors and economies support the previous results.

1.1. Statement of Problem

Experience has indeed revealed that fast food services are improving in Nigeria, yet the customers have not ceased from defecting to rival organizations. Trust is a big issue in the service industry as the product traded is intangible. Trust is needed to *tangibilize* the intangibility in service. Cases of mistrust abound in fast food operations in the study area; improper billing, service failure, unfulfilled service promises, among others. Finally, lack of commitment, poor knowledge of customer needs, little or no interest being paid to customer complaints and negative service experience are often being experienced at different service encounter points in fast food operation. More so, there is dearth of empirical evidence to support the direct relationship between relationship marketing and customer loyalty in fast food sector in Umuahia, Abia State. All these represent gaps that motivated this present study.

1.2. Purpose of the Study

The main purpose of this study is to determine the influence of customer relationship marketing on customer loyalty in hospitality industry in Umuahia, Abia State. Specifically, the study determined the influence of:
(a) Trust on brand attachment in chain fast food establishments in the study area.
(b) Relationship commitment on brand advocacy in chain fast food establishments in the study area.
(c) Service quality on customer patronage in chain fast food establishments in the study area.
(d) Customer knowledge management on customer experience in chain fast food establishments in the study.

1.3. Research Hypotheses

The following research hypotheses guided the study:

$H0_1$: Trust as a dimension of relationship marketing does not significantly influence brand attachment in chain fast food establishments in the study area.

$H0_2$: Relationship commitment as a dimension of relationship marketing has no significant impact on brand advocacy in chain fast food establishments in the study area.

$H0_3$: Service quality as a dimension of relationship marketing has no significant influence on customer patronage in chain fast food establishments in the study area.

$H0_4$: Customer knowledge management as a dimension of relationship marketing has no significant influence on customer experience in chain fast food establishments in the study area.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Design for the Study

The study adopted a descriptive survey research design and it was considered suitable because

it helps to study people's attitudes, motivation and other characteristics.

2.1.1. Ethics Statement

The study was carried out with informed oral consent, anonymity, and confidentiality of the respondents. The data was collected with strict compliance regarding ethical demands of respondents' data protection management as required in research studies.

2.2. Area of the Study

The study was carried out in Umuahia, the capital of Abia State, Nigeria. Umuahia has a good number of reputable chain fast food establishments in operation such as Crunchies, De Choice, Apples, Kilimanjaro, Chicken Republic, Jovit, Hoffers among others.

2.3. Population and Sample

Consumers of chain fast food establishments in Umuahia formed the study population and it is an infinite population. The researchers purposively used 200 consumers drawn from chain fast food establishments in Umuahia as sample size. The breakdown of the establishments and the copies of the research instrument administered are presented as follows: Crunchies ($n=40$), De Choice ($n=40$), Apples ($n=20$), Kilimanjaro ($n=40$), Jovit ($n=40$), and Hoffers ($n=20$).

2.4. Instrument for Data Collection and Study Procedure

The instrument for data collection was 40-itemed questionnaire, which had two sections. Section A sought to collect bio-data of the respondents, while B contained measurements of variables of the study. The researchers adapted the instrument from the studies of Abtin and Pouramiri (2016), and Bataineh et al. (2015). Relationship marketing variables (trust, commitment, service quality, and customer knowledge management) had 5 items each and were used to predict customer loyalty variables (brand attachment, brand advocacy, customer patronage, and customer experience) that had 5 items each. On each of the items, the respondents were requested to indicate their opinion on a four-point scale of Strongly Agree (4 point), Agree (3 point), Disagreed (2 point), and Strongly Disagreed (1 point). The instrument was subjected to Cronbach Alpha reliability test and a reliability coefficient of 0.79 was obtained confirming the internal consistency of the instrument.

2.5. Data Collection Technique

The administration of the instrument was based on observed customer throughput, and accessibility sampling technique was used, thus only accessible consumers were used for the study. This was achieved through the help of three research assistants (RAs). These RAs were trained on how to collect the data. All the copies of the instrument administered were retrieved on the spot. However, only 187 copies of the instrument were found usable for the study representing 93.5% of the total number.

2.6. Data Analysis Technique

The data collected were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistical tools. The descriptive analysis featured as a way of describing the properties of the data to show the variations in responses and opinions using frequencies and percentage denotations as well as other descriptive items. The parametric inferential analysis was done with the use of regression analysis on SPSS version 23 to determine the relationship between the independent variable and the dependent variable as can be seen in the hypotheses formulated for the study.

3. Results and Discussion

Table 1: Descriptive Analysis of Relationship Marketing Variables

S/N	Trust	Mean	Decision
1	This establishment gives me a feeling of trust.	3.01	Agreed
2	It gives me a trustworthy impression.	2.80	Agreed
3	I have trust in this establishment.	2.32	Disagreed
4	This establishment keeps promises.	2.65	Agreed
5	I have full confidence in this establishment to render good service.	3.02	Agreed
	Relationship Commitment		
6	The service providers are friendly and polite.	2.73	Agreed
7	My visits to the establishment enhance my tendency to have a long-term relationship with it.	2.74	Agreed
8	The service providers follow up with the expected promises that they make to resolve my complaints.	2.81	Agreed
9	I receive calls from this establishment often to find out how well its services have been.	2.14	Disagreed
10	The service providers are willing to connect with me personally when trying to resolve any service fluctuation.	2.59	Agreed
	Service Quality		
11	Services rendered have tangible features/value.	2.14	Disagreed
12	Services are reliable.	2.43	Disagreed
13	Service providers have quick response in service delivery.	2.94	
14	Services rendered assure me of interest in me.	2.45	Disagreed
15	Service providers empathise with me each time i visit the establishment.	2.64	Agreed
	Customer Knowledge Management		
16	This establishment has complete information on my profile.	2.41	Disagreed
17	It has complete documentation of all my transactions over time.	2.65	Agreed
18	The establishment uses information about me to provide quality service.	2.75	Agreed
19	The establishment calls me on my special Anniversary days.	2.67	Agreed
20	It has an organized way of relating with my family members.	3.06	Agreed

Table 1 reveals that the respondents disagreed on items 3, 9, 11, 12, 14, and 16 as each had a mean score of less than 2.50. This shows that there is mistrust, services lack tangible value and not reliable. Respondents also disagreed that the establishments have complete information on their profiles, and that the establishments do not call to find out how their services have been.

Table 2: Descriptive Analysis of Customer Loyalty Variables

S/N	Brand Attachment	Mean	Decision
1	I am personally connected to this brand.	2.94	Agreed
2	I have emotional bonding with this brand.	2.47	Disagreed
3	I am emotionally connected to this brand.	2.49	Disagreed
4	This brand automatically evokes many good thoughts about	3.04	Agreed

	the past, present, and future.		
5	I have positive thoughts and feelings towards this brand.	2.61	Agreed
	Brand Advocacy		
6	I am willing to recommend this brand to my friends.	2.67	Agreed
7	I am willing to encourage individuals to the multiple contact channels of this brand.	3.34	Agreed
8	I have only good things to say about this brand.	2.41	Disagreed
9	I am willing to encourage individuals to do business with this brand.	2.64	Agreed
10	When the name of this brand is mentioned in a conversation, I will defend the brand.	2.01	Disagreed
	Customer Patronage		
11	I will repeat my patronage of this brand.	2.74	Agreed
12	I get value for every money/time spent here.	2.81	Agreed
13	I am willing to develop a long-term relationship with this brand.	3.06	Agreed
14	I feel it is a good choice to keep doing business with this brand.	2.58	Agreed
15	This brand provides good services.	2.57	Agreed
	Customer Experience		
16	This brand is flexible and looks out for my needs.	2.43	Disagreed
17	This brand gives me what I need swiftly.	2.81	Agreed
18	I stay with this brand on account of my past dealings with them.	2.43	Disagreed
19	The service providers of this brand relate well to my situation.	2.58	Agreed
20	This brand keeps me up to date with products and services at all-time.	2.57	Agreed

Table 2 reveals that the respondents disagreed on items 2, 3, 8, 10, 16, and 18 as each had a mean score of less than 2.50. This shows that the respondents have no emotional attachment to the establishments, and will not defend the establishments in a conversation. The respondents also disagreed that the establishments are flexible and look out for their needs, and that their patronage is not based on past experience.

3.1. Hypothesis one

H0$_1$: Trust as a dimension of relationship marketing does not significantly influence brand attachment in chain fast food establishments in the study area.

Table 3. Regression estimates of the influence of trust on brand attachment

Variables		Coefficients	t-statistics	sig.
Trust		0.154	4.032	0.000
Constant		11.437	21.266	0.000
R	0.321			
R Squared	0.103			
Adjusted R- Squared	0.096			
F-Statistics	16.258			
Sig.	0.000			

Table 3 revealed that $R^2 = 0.103$, meaning that trust has a 10.3% effect on brand attachment of chain fast food establishments in Umuahia. This implies that 10.3% of the changes or variations in brand attachment can be accounted for by trust. Also, F statistics value of 16.258 is significant at 0.000 < 0.05. Thus, based on these, we can say that the estimate is statistically significant leading to the rejection of null hypothesis and the acceptance of the alternative hypothesis that trust as a dimension of relationship marketing has significant influence on brand attachment in chain fast food establishments in the study area.

3.2. Hypothesis two

$H0_2$: Relationship commitment as a dimension of relationship marketing has no significant impact on brand advocacy in chain fast food establishments in the study area.

Table 4. Regression estimates of the influence of relationship commitment on brand advocacy

Variables		Coefficients	t-statistics	sig.
Relationship Commitment		0.523	12.196	0.000
Constant		5.758	9.866	0.000
R	0.715			
R Squared	0.512			
Adjusted R- Squared	0.508			
F-Statistics	148.753			
Sig.	0.000			

Table 4 shows that the $R^2 = 0.512$, meaning that relationship commitment has a 51.2% effect on brand advocacy and that a percentage change in relationship commitment, created a 52.3% increase in brand advocacy. The F value of 148.753 is significant at 0.000 < than 0.05 Alpha. This implies that the test was significant, thus the null hypothesis was rejected and the alternative hypothesis was accepted which states that relationship commitment as a dimension of relationship marketing has significant impact on brand advocacy in chain fast food establishments in the study area.

3.3. Hypothesis three

$H0_3$: Service quality as a dimension of relationship marketing has no significant influence on customer patronage in chain fast food establishments in the study area.

Table 5. Regression estimates of the influence of service quality on customer patronage

Variables		Coefficients	t-statistics	sig.
Service Quality		0.680	6.162	0.000
Constant		3.983	2.649	0.009
R	0.459			
R Squared	0.211			
Adjusted R- Squared	0.205			
F-Statistics	37.967			
Sig.	0.000			

From Table 5, shows that the $R^2 = 0.211$, meaning that service quality has 21.1% effect on customer patronage it has a correlation value of 45.9% with customer patronage meaning that 21.1% of the changes in customer patronage can be accounted for by service quality. The F value of 37.967 is significant at 0.000 < 0.05 Alpha. Thus, it implies that the estimate is statistically significant and therefore the null hypothesis was rejected and the alternative accepted which states that service quality

as a dimension of relationship marketing has significant influence on customer patronage in chain fast food establishments in the study area.

3.4. Hypothesis four

H0$_4$: Customer knowledge management as a dimension of relationship marketing has no significant influence on customer experience in chain fast food establishments in the study area.

Table 6. Regression estimates of the influence of customer knowledge on customer experience

Variables		Coefficients	t-statistics	sig.
Customer Knowledge Management		0.443	10.448	0.000
Constant		6.827	11.629	0.000
R	0.659			
R Squared	0.435			
Adjusted R- Squared	0.431			
F-Statistics	109.164			
Sig.	0.000			

Table 6 shows that the R^2 = 0.435 meaning that customer knowledge management has 43.5% influence on customer experience and that 43.5% changes or variations in customer experience can be accounted for by customer knowledge management. The F value of 109.164 is significant at 0.000 which implies that the estimate is statistically significant. Therefore, the null hypothesis was rejected and the alternative accepted which states that ccustomer knowledge management as a dimension of relationship marketing has significant influence on customer experience in chain fast food establishments in the study area.

The findings of the inferential statistics in Table 3 revealed that trust has influence on brand attachment in chain fast food establishments in the study area. These findings corroborate the findings of Abtin and Pouramiri (2016); Bataineh et al. (2015); Ibenwa (2014), and Muhammadet al. (2017) in which brand attachment of customers were found to be highly driven by trust and commitment and that effective relationship between the firms and their consumers are based on trust factor that exists between them. As a result, brand trust is regarded as a partial mediator for brand loyalty and brand equity. This calls for the attention of the operators of chain fast food establishments to carry out their activities in a manner that develops trust and confidence in the minds of the consumers. According to Fafore (2016), this does not only catalyze brand attachment but builds corporate identity. The findings in Table 4 revealed that relationship commitment has a significant effect on brand advocacy. This follows that relationship commitment is imperative in creating brand advocates. Little wonder Fullerton (2011) found out in his study that customer satisfaction, trust, and commitment are keys to creating brand advocates. In the same way, Abdullah, et al. (2014), and Lariviere, et al. (2014) found out in their studies that relationship commitment, customer engagement and trust have significant influence on brand loyalty and brand advocacy. By this finding, it becomes necessary for operators of chain fast food establishments to show commitment in their dealings with customers.

The findings of the study further revealed in Table 5 that service quality has influence on customer patronage. This is not contrary to the results obtained by Taleghani et al., (2011); Nauroozi and Morghadam (2015). Customers desire quality service both in technical and functional terms as repeat patronage might not be achieved if service quality fails the quality test (Anyanwu & Ohwobevughe, 2021). This follows that services offered by chain fast food establishments should meet and surpass customer expectation thereby increasing the switching costs which ultimately influences

customer switching behaviour. Therefore, operators of chain fast food establishments should continuously improve their services in order to satisfy the customers, retain them, and enjoy their loyalty. Finally, the findings in Table 6 revealed that customer knowledge management has influence on customer experience. This supports the findings of Muhammad et al. (2017) where loyalty programs that provide direct mailings were found to have influence on customer share development, and customer knowledge management had a significant effect on the experiences that customers have with the organizations. The implication of this finding is that operators of fast-food establishments should try to understand the customers and their needs so as to provide services that will fill the need-gaps thereby enhancing customer experience. This present study has some limitations. Despite the findings of this study, many operators of fast food establishments might argue that the influence of the predictors under study in achieving customer loyalty may not be significant in fast food operations holding other predictors of customer loyalty constant. Certainly, demographic characteristics such as occupation, socioeconomic status, and country of origin were not considered in this present study and therefore might affect the generalization of the findings. Geographical and environmental features certainly might influence research findings and this present study will not be an exemption. Future studies should endeavor to examine these limitations and other predictors not used in this study to predict customer loyalty in other food service systems both in Nigeria and in other countries.

4. Conclusion

Based on the findings of the study, it is concluded that all the relationship marketing variables (trust, commitment, service quality, and customer knowledge management) studied have positive relationship with the indicators of customer loyalty (brand attachment, brand advocacy, customer patronage, and customer experience) in fast food establishments in Umuahia. In view of the findings, it is recommended that operators of hospitality establishments should try as much as possible to build trust as it is a great factor that helps cement relationships thereby developing brand attachment. Operators are to ensure that promises made to customers are fulfilled as it is a measure of not only trust but a serious show of commitment and this ultimately has a great influence on customer satisfaction leading to brand advocacy. Service quality should be made top priority by hospitality establishments, as service quality has become the cutting edge and major weapon of competition in the industry. There is need to have database where information and knowledge on the customers can be better managed such as website and other interactive social media platforms. This affords the establishments the opportunity of appreciating the customers on their memorable dates such as birthdays and anniversaries as this engenders positive experience in the minds of the customers.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Author Contributions

IBA, MNE, and COO conceived the study, designed the study, collected the data and wrote the

manuscript. The authors also approved the final draft of the manuscript.

Data Availability Statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article. Further enquiries can be directed to the corresponding author

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