# Customer Experience as Predictor of Loyalty in the Nigerian Hospitality Context

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***Abstract:*** *Today businesses are being done in an environment characterised with severe competition and uncertainty. And a number of studies have justified the need for organisationsto have large number of loyal customers for them to be relevant and competitive especially in the Nigerian hospitality context which is experiencing drop in hotels patronage. Although well-established marketing have been used to predict loyalty, this study is aimed at investigating the effect of customer experience on loyalty determination in the context of Nigeria. Hence, positive and significant relationship has been proposed between customer experience and loyalty in the Nigerian hotels industry. The review of extant literature in the study has shown the positive and significant connections between experience and loyalty in different contexts in various countries. Therefore, the study recommends that embracing of the concept of customer experience as a means of gaining competitive advantage. And the call to empirically investigate the connection between the study variables in future studies, particularly in the Nigerian hotels sector has been highly suggested.*
***Key words****: Customer Experience, Customer Loyalty, Hospitality, Nigeria*

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## I.    Introduction/ Background of The Study

The importance of tourism sector towards boosting the global economic prosperity has been well acknowledged by scholars. For example according to (Dutta, 2017) reported that it has contributed 10% to the global GDP, in addition to the global work force that increased at 10% as well. In fact the sector is making positive contribution towards the revenues and the profitability enhancement of various organisations in different countries and with special consideration to the service sector (Liat, Mansori, Chuan, & Imrie, 2017). In effect, according to Tefera and Govender, (2017) the tourism and hospitality industry, and specifically the hotel sector is among the fastest growing and most vibrant sector in the global service domain. Equally, the sector is impacting positively to the development of Nigerian economy. For example, according to Ezeamalu, (2016), the sector has generated about 56 billion Naira and contributed about 2% to the country's GDP in 2014 and there is high expectation of yearly increment.

However, the recent economic turmoil the country has undergone, due to the fall in the price of oil which is the major source of the country's income, coupled with the recent unrest particularly in the northern part of the country has led to the drop in the hotel occupancy rate by 35% (Chima, 2016). Similarly, hotels products are known for their commoditization where their offerings are more or less similar (Berezina, Bilgihan, Cobanoglu, & Okumus, 2016). This scenario is equally attested in Nigeria, as the services are less distinguishable in most cases (Gbenga & Osotimehin, 2015).

In addition, the cut throat competition coupled with heightened and increased customer expectation prevailing in the hospitality domain. It becomes desirable to build a long lasting relationship through loyalty formation for them to achieve higher profitability and sustained growth (Nelsen, 2016; Rai & Medha, 2013). Thus, it becomes imperative for the hotel industry managers to device several means of not only attracting new guests, but also retaining their existing ones (Nelsen, 2016;Peter, David, & Daphane, 2014).

To this end,Cossío-silva and Revilla-camacho, (2015) referred customer loyalty as the most vital intangible asset the firm will be proud of. They further affirmed that it differentiates one organisation from others which equally serve as a strong competitive weapon. Specifically, it has been attested that loyalty positively affects the economic performance of most hotels, through the reduction of acquisition cost, positive word of mouth, and recommending the hotel services to others (Nelsen, 2016). To this end, Jasinskas, Streimikiene, Svagzdiene, and Simanavicius, (2016)emphasised the need for the hotels organistions to device means of not only attracting guests, but also retain them. Since loyalty is not only beneficial to the organisations

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alone, but also to the customers as well, extra priority needs to be accorded to it. It significantly enhances mutualism between the two parties especially the reduction of uncertainties and risk on the part of the customers. This might be as a result of perceived risks clients may incur in their dealings with services (Martinez, 2015). Also, beside risk aversion, loyalty is also of benefits to the customers as it reduces their time and resources when evaluating multiple alternatives (Hunt et al., 2006; Kandampully & Zhan 2015). Palmatier (2008) addedit equally enhances mutual cooperation by boosting and sustaining flexible relationship.

Since scholars are in agreement that organisational successes are significantly being determined by their ability to attract, acquire and at the same time retain their existing customers (Yadab2016). And the quest to have large number of loyal customers is much more demanded in the service context. In effect, the importance of organistions to have customers who are loyal to their offerings have being emphasised in numerous studies (Bilgihan, Madanoglu, & Ricci, 2016; Kim & Kim, 2016). Specifically, loyalty has been identified as a factor that significantly enhances economic positions of hotels, specifically by reducing the cost associated with guests' acquisition and their positive word of mouth and recommendation to others (Nelsen, 2016).

The importance of having a powerful loyal customers base have been advocated by researchers specifically in the field of service marketing (Bilgihan, Madanoglu, & Ricci, 2016; Kim & Kim, 2016). Well known and established marketing constructs such as customer satisfaction and service quality that predict loyalty need to be supplemented with an emerging constructs due to the severity of the competition prevailing in today's competitive market (Kandampully, Zhang, & Bilgihan, 2015). Further, Lewin, Rajamma, and Paswan, (2015) affirmed that the present knowledge of determining loyalty in the service context needs to be enlarged, as much of the variables are largely context specific. Thus, this is study aimed at examining the effect of customer experience on loyalty in the Nigerian hotels context.

**Problem Statement**

It has been asserted that the environment in which hotels are operating is highly competitive and dynamic(Berezina et al., 2016). Also, Scholars identified various marketing constructs ranging from customer satisfaction (Nyadzayo & Khajehzadeh, 2016a), service quality (Banki, Ismail, Danladi, & Dalil, 2016; Gawuna, Abdul Rahman, Hakimi, & Ramli, 2017), perceived value (Marakanon & Panjakajornsak, 2017); image (Nyadzayo & Khajehzadeh, 2016b) and other variables.However, there is the realisation that the well-known marketing constructs predicting loyalty are necessary but still need to be supplemented to elicit loyalty in this connected, dynamic and turbulent marketing environment (Izogo, 2017; Kandampully, Zhang, & Bilgihan, 2015). Hence, the concept of customer experience is presumed to be a major determinant of loyalty in the hospitality context. Since hotels product is experiential in nature. In addition, Jain et al., (2017) insist that there is still paucity of studies regarding the concept of customer experience, specifically conceptualisation of the construct along with its theoretical development and by extension, its application need to be given additional consideration.

Paucity of studies regarding the measurement of customer experience has been advanced by scholars(Srivastava & Kaul, 2016). Specifically, in its relationship with customer satisfaction and loyalty Lin and Bennett(2014); Bagdare and Jain (2013); Maklan and Klaus, (2011)

## II. Literature Review

**The Concept of Customer Experience**

It is a well-known fact that customer experience being an emerging marketing construct is receiving attention from both scholars and practitioners due to its influence to create memorable, unique as well as pleasurable experiences (Jain et al., 2017). Hence, researchers and practitioners alike view it to be a strategic process for the formation of holistic customer value that aids organisation to differentiate their offerings, thereby achieving sustained competitive advantage (Terblanche, 2018).In effect, a paradigm shift from consumption of commodities to the era of goods (service) and then experience emphasizing that a new economy (experience economy) has emerged (Pine & Gilmore 1998, 1999). Thus, it is considered to be a new concept not only in theory, but also in practice (Pine& Gilmore, 1998).

According to Brun, Rajaobelina, Ricard, Berthiaume, and Ricard, (2017) customer experience construct is complex in nature, and at the same time, context specific. Hence, Jain et al., (2017) defined customer experience to be an interactive process emanating from some cues, (cognitive and emotional), being moderated by customers and other characteristics leading to unique memories that can be pleasurable or otherwise. Specifically, Customer experience is described as "a holistic concept, representing sum total of feelings, perceptions and attitudes created during successive stages of consumption process as a result of interactive process. It is created by integrating customer interaction, co-creation and personalization in the experiential value creation involving value in pre-use, value in use and value in post-use" (Jain et al., 2017 p658).

In fact, customer experience is a concept that ought to be given increased consideration due to its role of enhancing total organisational efficiency. Keiningham, Ball, Benoit, and Buoye, (2017), for example, viewed customer experience as an emerging area that enhances organisational competitiveness and improved market share growth. Lemon and Verhoef, (2016) reaffirmed that; it is the new area capable of aiding organisations to compete. In fact, Pappas, Pateli, Giannakos, and Chrissikopoulos(2014), emphasised that, apart from customer satisfaction, customer experience becomes the most important variable the enhances customer retention. According toHwang and Seo, (2016), customer experience is a context specific concept, and has the capacity of influencing the long-term reputation of an organisation, brand recognition thereby leading to the achievement of financial results (Rather & Sharma, 2017). Having examined its relative importance in achieving organisational objectives, the need to look at its relationship with customer loyalty becomes imperative.

**Relationship between Customer Experience and Loyalty**

The link between customer experience and loyalty has been highlighted by scholars in their various studies in multiple industries and different geographical regions. For example,the study of Ali, Kim, Li, and Jeon, (2018) examined the effects customer experience delight, satisfaction, and by extension loyalty in the context of Malaysian theme parks. Two hundred and ninety two(292) guests conveniently selected were involved in the study. PLS-SEM was used for the analysis of the data. The results indicated that the dimensions of customer experience comprising of interaction with staff, physical setting, along with interaction of customers had a positive effect on delight and satisfaction.Brun, Rajaobelina, Ricard, Berthiaume, and Ricard, (2017)examined the link between 5-dimensinal construct of customer experience (involving behavioral, social sensory, cognitive and affective) and their effect on service provider loyalty. Using 484 respondents in the Canadian banking context, the findings revealed that only affective dimension had an impact on loyalty.

In the retailing context, the study of Terblanche, (2018) gave emphasis on the dimensions of customer shopping experience comprising of; assortment, internal shopping environment, interaction with staff and shoppers' emotions, impacted individually and collectively on satisfaction. And satisfaction in turn, also had positive relationship with repurchase intentions.Drawing from technology adoption theory, Roy, Balaji, and Nguyen, (2017) studied the link among smart customer experience, satisfaction, shopping effectiveness, perceived risk, word of mouth intention, behavioural intentions and stickiness. It was found that, smart customer experience has a direct and positive impact on satisfaction, and at the same time, decreases the perceived risks involved in smart phone purchases. In an online shopping context, the wok of Pappas et al., (2014) using a SEM along with multi multi-group analysis investigated the moderating effect of experience on satisfaction and customers' intention to re-buy. The study using responses from 393 customers empirically validated the moderating influence of experience on both satisfaction and customers' repurchase intention. Specifically, the outcome of the study identified that, prior experience strengthens the connection between performance expectancy and customer satisfaction. And at the same time, weakens the link between satisfaction with customers' intention to re-patronise.

Ong, Lee, and Ramayah, (2018)'s work was in restaurant context where customer experience was measured through Sensory, Affective, experience as well as the Intellectual experience dimensions. The work investigated each component and their effect on loyalty, specifically on Willingness to pay more, Word of mouth, Repurchase Intention. Using 228 respondents, the outcome of the study indicated that had an influence on willingness to pay more and repurchase intention. Similarly, affective experience also led to word of mouth and repurchase intention. Moreover, intellectual experience greatly determines repurchase intention, word of mouth along with willingness to pay more.

After a comprehensive review of scholarly materials consisting of 69 articles, 12 books, along with a complete book relating to customer experience,Jain et al., (2017) found that customer experience plays a pivotal role of not only attracting, but also retaining customers. The outcome of their rigorous literature review on articles and other scholarly materials that span for 25 years, specifically from 1990 to 2015, Jain et al., (2017)emphasise the need for various industry managers to view and consider customer experience a strategic means that creates customer value, satisfaction, loyalty, differentiation and competitive advantage. Specifically, there is the need for the hotels to offer pleasurable and experiential memories to their respective guests. In fact, customer experience is considered to be among the most vital predictor of loyalty.

Kim, (2018) developed a theoretical model regarding the impact of memorable tourism experience on their behavioural intentions. Specifically, the study investigated the structural linkages among destination image, satisfaction, WOM publicity and revisit intention. Their empirical results confirmed that memorable tourism experience positively and significantly determines behavavioural intentions. In fact its predictive power is much greater than visitor satisfaction.

**Dimensions of Customer Experience**

Scholars conceptualised the concept of experience differently depending on their understanding and the context of its usage. For example, four dimensions were developed by (Pine& Gilmore, 1998) consist of; aesthetic, escapism entertainment and education. And have been peratonalised in various settings for example, in the hospitality by many studies (Oh, Fiore, & Jeoung, 2007). Similarly, Brakus, et, al (2009) came up with four-dimensional measure in relation to experience, involving; sensory, affective, intellectual as well as the behavioural dimensions.

Experience represents holistic responses from the contact customers had with their service providers, consisting of both cognition and affect. It is thus believed that experience is associated with experiential aspects (Palmer, 2010). Schmitt (1999) submitted that experience is created through feeling, thinking and other action of a customer related to the offerings of an organisation. Hemmington (2007)developed five dimensional measures of the construct in the hospitality settings. They include; host-guest relationship, generosity, safety and security, surprises, as well as theater and performance. Knutson et al (2009) came up with four. They are; environment, driving benefit, incentive and accessibility. Walls (2013) invented two dimensions which involve; physical environment along with human interaction. Similarly, Berry et al (2002) has functional together with emotional features as the two dimensions of service experience. Pijls, Groen, Galetzka, and Pruyn, (2017)have recently conceptualized customer experience into three dimensions of inviting, care and comfort.

Also, more recently Pijls, Groen, Galetzka, and Pruyn, (2017)developed a multi-dimensional measure specifically validated in the hospitality context. Their work came up with the new dimensions of the construct, the dimensions are; inviting, care and comfort. This study goes with this recent concptualisation of the concept. This is because of the experiential nature of hotels offerings. The three dimensions have thirteen items, with inviting and comfort having three items each, and care with seven items. Specifically, Inviting has these items; this hotel feels inviting, this hotel feels open and during my visit I experience freedom. The components of care include; this hotel provides support to me, this hotel is involved in me, I feel as I am treated like a king/queen, this hotel does its best to take care of me, this hotel relieves me of tasks or worries, this hotel is interested in me, I feel important at this hotel. While the items in the comfort category are, I feel at ease at this hotel,I feel comfortable at this hotel and I feel relaxed at this hotel. And this study considers this measure most appropriate and captivating in capturing the experiential nature of hotels.

## III. Conclusion And Recommendations

Organisations can achieve elicit loyalty by their ability to identify the most appropriate blend of variables that enhances or encourage customer retention (Saleem, Ahmad, & Ismai, 2016). Thus, it is of immense importance to further understand, discover and implementother determinants of loyalty in today's Nigeria's hospitality setting charactrised where businesses are being done in hyper- competitive environments. Since attitudes are being largely shaped by the existing and prospective customer experience (Srivastava & Kaul, 2016). Hoteliers need to ensure that adequate considerations are in existence to ensure guests have a memorable experience in their stay, as loyalty can be achieved when firms successfully imbibe effective customer experience.

The study is expected to be of immense benefits to both the academic world as well as to the layers in the hotels industry, specifically those operating within the Nigerian environment. It will therefore give a picture on specific predictors of loyalty which they can imbibe to achieve their objectives of retaining guests.It is highly recommended that there is a greater need to empirically examine and validate the influence of customer experience in the context of African continent, and in particular the Nigerian hotels settings. Furthermore, the inclusion of the concept to mediate or moderate the relationships among determinants of loyalty is very scarce in the literature. Hence the need to include the concept to moderate such relationships in future studies.

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