



Physical Evidence and Customer Patronage of Hospitality Firms in Rivers State

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Abstract: *Physical evidence has been suspected to enhance consumers' ability to perceive the intangible elements of a service in order to make evaluative judgment of quality upon which purchase decision may be based. In this study, we examined the extent to which architectural design, ambient conditions and corporate identity as proxies of physical evidence, relate to customer patronage of hospitality firms. The population of the study comprised customers of hospitality firms in Rivers State. Data gleaned from three hundred and forty (340) customers was used in the final analysis of the study. The Pearson Product Moment Correlation was the statistical tool employed to test the study's hypotheses, relying on the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 22.0. The study found that physical evidence relates to customer patronage, as architectural design, ambient conditions and corporate identity posted positive and statistically significant relationships with customer patronage. The study concluded that physical evidence informs customer patronage of hospitality firms and that customer patronage of hospitality firms depends on physical evidence in terms of architectural design, ambient conditions and corporate identity. Thus, the study recommends that hospitality firms that seek improved customer patronage should make concerted efforts to organize the service environment and match it to their core service offerings so as to enhance customers' overall service experience.*

Keywords: *Architectural design, ambient condition, corporate identity, customer patronage, physical evidence*

Introduction

The hospitality industry consists of firms that provide such services as accommodations, restaurants and bars, travel and tourism within the service sector of the state. The firms in the hospitality industry depend on consumers who have disposable income and leisure time to patronize their businesses. The hospitality industry provides salutary services in spectacular, fantastically organized environments; with serene landscaping, sensational architecture, enveloping ambience, and well oriented staff. As a result of the foregoing and the importance of the services consumers are always willing to spend their spare time and income in these environments. Firms in the hospitality industry thus make significant investment to provide attractive and serene service environment to meet the relaxation needs of customers. Firm that do not have the capacity to put appropriate physical evidence in place will not enjoy the patronage of consumers. The role of physical environment in signaling customers about the nature of service that can be provided in a given environment cannot be overemphasized. In

fact, it could be argued that hospitality firms' ability to provide befitting physical environments that augments their core services is associated with customer patronage. It thus follows that hospitality firms that are not adequately patronized, may be failing in their task of appropriately manipulating the "physical evidence" to enhance customer experience. Put succinctly, hospitality firms' failure to get adequate customer patronage may be connected to their inability to manipulate ambient conditions; appropriately organize service system designs; and put forward a well-dressed customer-oriented service staff to provide their core service offerings.

Physical evidence is paramount in service marketing due to the fact that pre-purchase assessment of service is difficult because of the peculiar nature of service. The peculiar nature of services poses challenges for marketers in their effort to establish and maintain relationship with customers; as customers' evaluation of service is totally dependent on personal perception of the service encounter. Also, customers are skeptical about overall service experience because services are intangible: They cannot be seen, tasted, felt, heard or smelled prior to purchase. Other characteristics of service that pose challenge to marketers are: heterogeneity - the quality of service depends on who provides them and when, where, and how; inseparability - services cannot be separated from their providers; perishability - services cannot be stored for later sale or use. As a result of these, customers find it difficult to evaluate service quality and make purchase decision. Extant literature however, suggests that customers can rely on several measures of service quality to make purchase decision. Such measures include (1) reliability; (2) responsiveness; (3) assurance; (4) empathy; and (5) tangible as postulated in the SERVQUAL model (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1985); or (1) the service delivery process (functional dimension); (2) the outcomes which are produced for the customer (technical dimension); and (3) the customer's perception about the company (image dimension) as proposed by Gronroos (1984).

Consumers cannot experience the service before making a purchase decision; they make purchase decision based on preliminary evaluation of tangible elements associated with the service. That is to say, there must be certain clues that will help them make superficial assessment before obtaining the service. Thus, consumers make inference about the service quality from things they can see in connection with the service such as the place, people, price, equipment, and communication (Kotler & Armstrong, 2013); and make purchase decision accordingly. In other words, to allay the uncertainty in the service experience, consumers look for signals of service quality, prior to purchase. It is therefore the task of marketers to provide symbolic evidence about the quality of their services to enable consumers create a mental picture of the service experience or the capability of the service provider. Therefore, the focus of this study is to determine the connection between physical evidence and customer patronage of hospitality firms.

Literature Review and Hypotheses

Physical evidence

Physical evidence encompasses the environment in which service is delivered, together with all the tangible components that facilitate service performance (Zeithaml & Bitner, 2003). It

consist the physical environment in which the service is delivered, the elements that facilitate the service delivery, the organization of these elements, and other physical components that underpin the service experience and enable consumers evaluate the quality of service. The physical environment is carefully organized by service organizations to facilitate the way in which service is delivered to customers. The elements of physical evidence help to influence consumers in the way they perceive the performance of service encounter and also affect the perception of an experience independent of the actual outcome (Biggers & Pryor, 1982).

Kotler (1973) contends that there is no composition of physical evidence that is ideal across industries and that since the taste of customers in each market varies, the elements of the physical environment should be based on (a) the target audience; (b) what that target audience is seeking from the buying experience; (c) the physical environment variables that can fortify emotional reactions sought by the buyers; and (d) the ability of the physical environment to compete with the physical environment of competitors. Accepting the foregoing, Bitner (1992) posits that physical evidence covers all the objective physical factors that can be controlled by the firm to enhance (or constrain) the actions of employee and customer. The author further posits that these controllable physical factors such as signage, furnishing, layout, colour, cleanliness, smell, music and many more others can be systematically manipulated to produce desired effects in the form of favourable disposition towards the service environment and the organization providing the service. Similarly, Babin and Attaway (2000) opine that the service environment can arouse positive emotions which help to determine value that motivates customers to repeatedly patronize a particular service provider.

The elements in the physical environment constitute an essential part of the service encounter and delivery process; since variables associated with the service serve as clues for the invisible service (Sweeney & Wyber, 2002; Hoffman & Turley, 2002). Thus, Stedman (2003) and Ryu and Han (2010) assert that the colourful setting of a physical environment determines customers' overall satisfaction and loyalty. Furthermore, Wilson, Zeithaml, Bitner, and Gremler (2008) assert that physical environment is vital to the delivery of service, and has the capacity to close the gap between customers' expectation and actual service delivery. Recognizing the multidimensionality of the physical environment, Zeithaml and Bitner (2003) decomposed it into: ambient conditions; spatial layout and functionality; and signs, symbols, and artifacts. Similarly, Harris, McBride, Ross and Curtis (2002) identify three dimensions of the physical environment: architectural design; interior design; and ambient conditions. Architectural design includes the building itself, spatial layout and functionality, size of the room, and window placement. Interior design includes furnishings, colours and artwork. Ambient conditions comprise lighting, noise levels, odor and temperature.

In this study we have subsumed interior design into architectural design. Thus, architectural design comprises the building itself, spatial layout and functionality, size of the room, window placement, furnishings, colours and artwork. We have also added corporate brand which encompasses the name, signs, symbols, artifacts, logos or a combination of these and other tangible elements which are displayed exteriorly to identify and differentiate the service provider or firm. Based on the foregoing, we adopt architectural design, ambient conditions, and corporate brand as dimensions of physical evidence in this study.

Architectural design

Architectural designs are of different types. In this regard, Baker (1987) posits that design factors can either be functional or aesthetic. Functional design includes the building itself, spatial layout and functionality, size of the room, window placement, furnishings. In the view of Azila-Gbettor, Avorga, Danku and Atatsi (2013) it includes layout, signage and comfort. Wakefield and Blodgett (1994) suggests that care should be taken in the design of these functional elements so they can facilitate customers' exploration and stimulation within the service environment. Examples of aesthetic elements are colour, architecture, style, materials, scale and décor (Azila-Gbettor *et al.*, 2013). Wakefield and Blodgett (1994) opine that aesthetic factors refer to the physical elements which customers view to evaluate their artistic quality. Baker (1987) argues artistic elements are the extras that contribute to a customer's sense of pleasure in experiencing a service. Although aesthetic and functional factors are closely related the difference between them is observed by Aubert- Gamet (1997) who states that aesthetic factors promote sensory pleasure in the service experience while functional factors facilitate the behaviour of customers. Baker (1987) and Aubert-Gamet (1997) and Schneider (1987) posit that it is easier for customers to evaluate these design factors because they are more perceptible than ambient conditions and so have a greater propensity to influence customers' perception of the service.

Furthermore, spatial layout, decor and artifacts greatly contribute to the attractiveness of the physical environment (Wakefield & Blodgett, 1994). This is especially so in the hospitality sector. While customers remain inside a building, they are likely to evaluate consciously and subconsciously the pleasant appearance of the interior designs as well as the quality of the materials used in construction, artwork, and decoration (Han & Ryu, 2009). The arrangement of the spatial layout to provide for ease of movement, and functionality is also paramount (Bitner, 1992). Nguyen and Leblanc (2002) describe spatial layout as the way in which furniture, equipment, machinery and other tangible objects are arranged in accordance with the service delivery process. According to Bitner (1992) customers' evaluations of the attractiveness as well as the overall aesthetic impression are influenced by various aspects of interior elements and artifacts. The color schemes of the dining area's walls; ceiling and wall decorations; pictures and paintings; plants and flowers, table-wares; (such as glass and silverware); linens (such as table cloths and napkin); floor coverings; and quality furniture (such as dining table and chair) can all play significant role in delivering an image and in creating an overall aesthetic impression (Han & Ryu, 2009). All these can serve as important clues by which customers will evaluate the overall service experience.

Ambient condition

The ambience include temperature, smell, and music or sound emanating from the place where the service is delivered which consciously or subconsciously help the consumer to experience the service. The ambient condition is not the same across industries or even firms in the same industry: it can be diverse. The ambience of a health spa is relaxing and calm, and the music and smell emanating from it underpin the service experience. The ambience of a nightclub on the other hand will be loud noise, loud music and bright lights which obviously in a different way

will enhance the customer experience. According to Azila-Gbettor *et al.* (2013) posit that customer's awareness of ambient factors is low because they usually exist on a subconscious level.

However, Mattila and Wirtz (2001) argue ambient factors can affect a customer's evaluation of the service experience and this can make the customer to either have favourable disposition or otherwise depending on the experience. Customers will be encouraged to pursue the service consumptions and also have their attitudes and behaviors affected toward the service provider if the ambient conditions of the physical environment is carefully manipulated (Hui, Dube & Chebat, 1997; Nguyen & Leblanc, 2002). In forming customers' impression the elements in the ambient condition plays a very crucial role (Bitner, 1992) and they are very important components of the service that give signals to customers and create a perceptual image in the minds of customers (Kotler, 1973). In a similar vein Bitner (1992) posits that the factors in the ambient conditions have strong signals which are very influential in communicating the image and purpose of the business to its customers.

Corporate identity

Corporate identity includes the name, signs, symbols, artefacts or a combination of these that support the firms' corporate image and brand identity. For instance, when you visit an airport you will see signs that will smoothly guide you around the facility, as well as statues and logos displayed throughout the complex. Brand identity has meaning well beyond the physical elements. Consumers view brand as an important part of a service, and so they attach meanings to it and develop brand relationships. Corporate identity helps customers to identify a brand or service provider that might deliver the desired quality of service. Corporate identity provides information about products thereby helping the sale of that product. Levy and Weitz (2004) posit that graphics such as pictures have the ability to add character, beauty and uniqueness to the physical environment. Therefore, corporate identity should be strategically and conspicuously displayed to give direction, and appropriately attract attention and augment the core service. The essence is that, in the marketing of services the physical environment plays significant role in customer satisfaction, retention, and business survival.

Adele and Opara (2014) states that "signs are particularly important in forming first impression, for communicating new service concepts, for repositioning a service and in highly competitive industries where customers are looking for clues to differentiate the organization." When firms display signs displayed on the exterior or interior of a structure they are communicating clearly with the world in a nonverbal form. These signs may be in form of labels (e.g. name of company, name of department), directions (e.g. entrances, exits), and others which may communicate rules of behaviour (e.g. no smoking, speed limit, etc). There are many items in the physical environment that implicitly or explicitly communicate messages to the public and users. In a less explicit communication, the quality of materials used in construction, artwork, presence of certificates and photographs on walls, floors coverings, and personal objects displayed in the environment can all communicate symbolic meaning and create an overall esthetic impression. Furthermore, McCaskey (2000) posits that certain cues in an office

environment such as size placement of desk may symbolize status and be used to reinforce professional image.

Customer patronage

A patron is someone that buys from a brand, talk favorably about the brand and its services, pay less attention to competing brands, is less price-sensitive and adopts new services and upgrades from the brand (Nyakweba, Wesonga & Bosire, 2015). Customer patronage is particularly important to in the hospitality sector because firms in the sector rely on consistent patronage for business sustenance. Bujisic, Hutchinson and Parsa states that the determination of customers' preference is a key issue in consumer research because it guides marketers on how to adapt or generate value that elicit customer patronage (Njite, Njoroge, Parsa, Parsa & van der Rest, 2015). Customer patronage deals with the processes that customers engage in when selecting a product or brand among alternatives; as well as the factors and attributes used in the selection. Customer patronage is also the degree to which buying units concentrate purchases over time to a given product or brand. Customer patronage develops through positive reinforcement and repetitive buying behaviour (Nyakweba *et al.*, 2015).

Customer patronage according to behavioral scientists, results from a trial that gets reinforced through satisfaction, and leads to repeat purchase (Nyakweba *et al.*, 2015; Palmer, 1998); while cognitive psychologists contends that customer patronage builds through mental processes, based on the believe that consumers engage in extensive problem solving behavior involving services. Customer patronage has of late been of concern to marketers due to the phenomenon of customer switching. Palmer (1998) among others, states that boredom and dissatisfaction with a service, availability of new service providers and increased concern over price are the reasons for decline in customer patronage. Nwulu and Asiegbu posit that business sustenance in today's highly competitive business environment requires firms to win and keep the patronage of customers (Nwiepe & Ateke, 2016). Babin and Darden suggest that terminal values, lifestyles, social class, and media habits are antecedent to patronage (Nwiepe & Ateke, 2016), and affects store attribute importance; which may be evoked by a stimulus that sets needs in queue in motion, leading to patronage intentions and patronage behaviour. Customer patronage is a phenomenon that requires continual observation because of the constant social, cultural and economic changes in society which affects patronage behavior (Shim & Kotsiopulus) in Nwiepe and Ateke (2016).

Physical evidence and customer patronage

Previous studies have indicated that the environment in which service is delivered has impact on customers' attitude. Onuoha and Nnenanya's study on the impact of service-scape on customer patronage of fuel stations in Abia State, Nigeria showed that service-scape dimensions like ambient conditions, spatial layout have significant impact on customer patronage (Onuoha & Nnenanya, 2017). Similarly, Amue, Adiele and Friday (2013) observed that ambient conditions, spatial layout and signs, symbols and artifacts as aspects of physical settings relate to patronage of 3star Hotels in Nigeria's Federal Capital Territory Abuja. Clay, Munyaradzi and Kossam (2013) in another study found that ambient factors influence customer

patronage. Additionally, Babin and Attaway (2000) found that the service environment can arouse positive emotions which help to determine value that motivates customers to repeatedly patronize a particular service provider; while Stedman (2003) and Ryu and Han (2010) assert that the colourful setting of a physical environment determines the extent of customer overall satisfaction and loyalty. Furthermore, Wilson *et al.* (2008) assert that physical environment is vital to service delivery due on its capacity to close the gap between customers' expectation and actual service delivery; just as Han and Ryu (2009) found that the innovative interior design, pleasing music, unique color, scheme, ambience, spacious layout, appealing table settings, and attractive service staff significantly influence customer patronage and loyalty to service providers. In view of the foregoing, this study hypothesizes that:

H_{A1}: There is a significant relationship between architectural design and customer patronage.

H_{A2}: There is a significant relationship between ambient condition and customer patronage.

H_{A3}: There is a significant relationship between corporate identity and customer patronage.

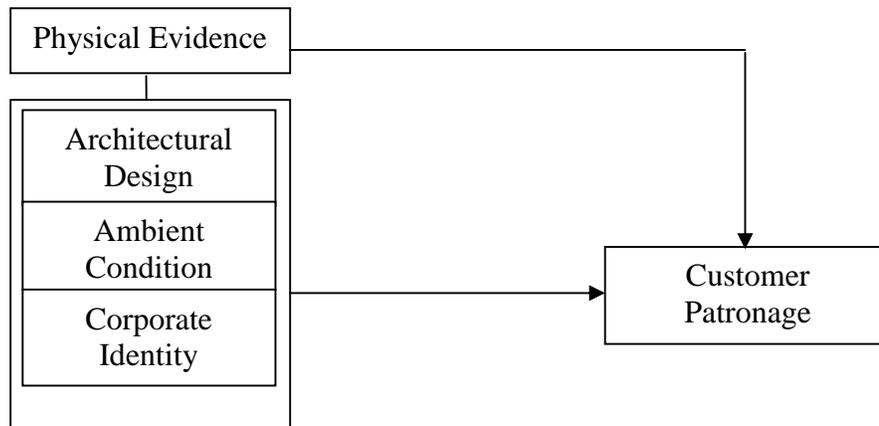


Figure 1: Model of the Study

Methodology

The aim of this study was to determine the link between physical evidence and customer patronage. The study adopted an explanatory research design; collected data via a cross-sectional survey. The study was conducted in a natural setting; hence, no bias was introduced into the likely relationship between physical evidence and customer patronage. The population of the study comprised customers of hospitality firms in Rivers State. The population large, flowing and infinite however three hundred and eighty-four (384) respondents were sampled based on Krejcie and Morgan table (1970) sample size formula to provide primary data for the study through a structured questionnaire designed in Likert scale of very low extent to very high. Out of the three hundred and eighty-four (384) copies of questionnaire issued, three hundred and forty (340) were returned valid and used in the final analysis of the study. The reliability of the research instrument was determined via a pilot study (pretest) that was conducted; and the data subjected to Cronbach's Alpha test of reliability with a threshold of 0.70 set by Nunally (1978). Pearson Product Moment Correlation was the statistical tool

adopted to test the hypotheses in the study. The analysis was done with the help of the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 22.0. Table 1 below presents the summary of the results of test f reliability.

Table 1: Reliability analysis of study variables

S/N	Variables	Number of Items	Cronbach's Alpha Coefficient
1	Architectural Design	5	0.917
2	Ambient Condition	5	0.728
3	Corporate Identity	5	0.892
4	Customer Patronage	5	0.785

Source: SPSS Output from Survey Questionnaire

As shown from the SPSS output on table 1, all the variables in the research instrument have high Cronbach's Alpha Coefficients greater than the threshold of 0.70. It is an indication to show the internal consistency of the instrument, and the extent to which the questionnaire item were reliable to measure all the variables in the study.

Table 2: Results of tested hypotheses

		Architectural Design	Ambient Condition	Corporate Identity	Customer Patronage
Architectural Design	Pearson Correlation	1	.740**	.847**	.700**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000	.000	.000
	N	340	340	340	340
Ambient Condition	Pearson Correlation	.740**	1	.614**	.565**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000		.000	.000
	N	340	340	340	340
Corporate Identity	Pearson Correlation	.847**	.614**	1	.554**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000		.000
	N	340	340	340	340
Customer Patronage	Pearson Correlation	.700**	.565**	.554**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000	
	N	340	340	340	340

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Source: SPSS Output from Survey Questionnaire

Discussion of Findings

Results of the data analysis indicate that the components of physical evidence have positive relationship with customer patronage. Specifically, architectural design has strong, positive and statistically significant relationship with customer patronage. This is evident in the correlation coefficient of 0.700; with a probability value of 0.000 less than 0.01 (i.e. $p = 0.000 < 0.01$), hence the relationship between the variables is significant at 0.01. Similarly, ambient condition and corporate identity have moderate, positive and significant relationships with customer patronage as shown in the correlation coefficients of 0.565 and 0.554 respectively; with a probability value of 0.000 less than 0.01 (i.e. $p = 0.000 < 0.01$).

The findings of this study are consistent with results of previous studies conducted by other scholars. For example, our findings are in line with the findings of Onuoha and Nnenanya (2017) that investigated the impact of servicescape on customer patronage of fuel stations in Abia State, Nigeria. Similarly, our findings are consistent with the findings of Amue *et al.* (2013) who studied physical settings and patronage of Three Star Hotels in Nigeria's Federal Capital Territory Abuja. More so, the findings of Clay *et al.* (2013) on the impact of ambient factors on patronage in Zimbabwe were corroborated by our study. The results of our study also align with the result of Babin and Attaway (2000) who found that the service environment can arouse positive emotions which help to determine value that motivates customers to repeatedly patronize a particular service provider.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Based on the findings we conclude that physical evidence is a veritable tool that enables consumers of hospitality services to make proper superficial evaluation of quality. Physical evidence also enables companies to enhance patronage of customers. However, it is pertinent to state that businesses do not grow by single patronage which may be as a result of the physical evidence but repeated patronage arising from a match between the physical evidence and the core service. In view of the findings made, the discussions presented and the conclusion reached, the study recommends that hospitality firms that seek improved customer patronage should:

- 1) Carefully design the service area's architecture to enhance service delivery.
- 2) Manipulate the ambience to promote customer service experience.
- 3) Build and maintain corporate brands that can be associated with quality.
- 4) Ensure that any means by which they can communicate with the world including uniforms and dresses of their employees and web-pages are be carefully manipulated to attract customers.
- 5) Strike a match between the tangible elements and the core service to enhance overall customer experience.

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