
Contact Employee Recognition and Customer Loyalty of Healthcare Firms in South-South, Nigeria

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Abstract: *This study ascertained the link between contact employee recognition and customer loyalty of healthcare firms in South-South Nigeria. Data utilized for the was obtained through a structured questionnaire distributed to 98 sampled contact employees of federal teaching hospitals in South-South, Nigeria. This study was directed at the teaching hospitals because they provide the widest admittance to patients with the completeness of all cadres of healthcare workers. The data collected was analyzed and the hypotheses were tested using the Spearman's Rank Order Correlation Co-Efficient Statistical Tool. The findings revealed a significant and positive relationship between the predictor and criterion variables of the study. Therefore, the study concludes that contact employee recognition significantly relates to customers' loyalty, and customer's loyalty expressed as resistance to switching, repeat patronage, and word of mouth is a function of contact employees' recognition of the healthcare providers. Premised on the conclusion, the study recommends that, healthcare firms should put in place appropriate contact employees recognition packages to motivate and improve performance. Healthcare providers should consider the various employee recognition methods discussed in the literature imperative to improve on customers' resistance to switching behavior, repeat patronage, and positive word of mouth.*

Keywords: *Contact Employee Recognition, Customer Loyalty, Resistance to Switching, Repeat Patronage and Word Of Mouth.*

INTRODUCTION

The healthcare sector is made up of different institutions with a common objective of attracting potential customers, retaining existing ones, and expediting their progress in the loyalty ladder. With improved technology adoption among operators in the healthcare sector and globalization of shared healthcare knowledge, the challenge of achieving customers' loyalty ought to have been ameliorated. However, the quickly evolving value requirement of customers, coupled with fierce intra- and inter-industry competition has continually stretched the ability of healthcare providers, especially tertiary healthcare providers' in South-South, Nigeria, to win the loyalty of customers. This is despite these healthcare providers' deployment of novel service delivery strategies aimed at commanding customers' loyalty that engender sustainable competitive edge.

Besides, the notable competition among players in the healthcare sector, there are also indications of palpable dissatisfaction among patients in Nigeria, concerning the quality of services delivered by the healthcare providers. Ateke (2020) observes that healthcare providers are accused of "wrong diagnoses, mismanagement of health crises, delayed attention, and nonchalant attitude of service personnel and poor service provider-client relationship". These

observations cohere with the way patients easily shift patronage from one hospital to another; and even resort to medical tourism in search of better healthcare (Taiye et al., 2017). The unending race for new customers by hospitals is a further demonstration of the suspicion that healthcare providers do not command the loyalty of customers (Sik et al., 2014). The prevalence of disloyalty of healthcare's customers may be attributed to healthcare providers' lack of recognition for contact employee efforts and contributions in achieving her set goals and objectives.

Recognition as defined by Hart (2011) cited in Vera and Peter (2015) is an appropriate, informal, or formal acknowledgment of an employee's effort in achieving the organization's goals and values. Contact employee recognition has been found to have a significant positive relationship with employee service quality delivery (Rahim & Daud, 2013) which could as well lead to customer loyalty triggered by satisfied service quality experienced. This study adopted resistance to switching, repeat patronage, and word-of-mouth as proxies of customers' loyalty, the criterion variable of the study. According to Butcher et al. (2001), customers exhibits resistance to switching when they reject offers from competing brands. Repeat patronage is a behavioral demonstration of customers loyalty through re-patronage of a company and continuing association with that company in future purchases while positive word of mouth is a strong recommendation and praises customers make about a brand or its products to potential consumers (Achieve Global, 2008; Butcher et al., 2001; Otite & Didia, 2017).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Foundation

This study on contact employee recognition and customer loyalty of healthcare firms in South-South Nigeria is premised on the Resource-Based Theory.

Resource-Based Theory: Resource-based theory was proposed by Wernerfelt (1984) specifically to ascertain an organization's resources that can be effectively and efficiently engaged to gain and sustain an edge over competing brands or companies (Maxwell et al., 2014) in an industry. The theory claimed that an organization's performance depends on its resource profile and further explained why some organizations outsmart others and distinctively maintain a prime place in competitive space (Winnie & Franciss, 2016; Didia & Idenedo, 2017). The theory assumed that; there may be variations in the resource profile of organizations within an industry and the resources may not be moveable across organizations as such, the variations could last long (Barney, 1991).

Resources according to Maxwell et al. (2014), is "all assets, capabilities, organizational processes, firm attributes, information, knowledge, controlled by a firm that enables the firm to conceive of and implement strategies that bestow on the firm a competitive advantage". Consequently, for firms to achieve a sustainable competitive edge (Baker & Sinkula, 2005), they must possess key resources, capabilities, and attributes that are valuable, rare, difficult to imitate, and not substitutable which are in turn effectively deployed in the chosen markets (Barney, 1991). Employees (internal customers) of an organization are bestowed with the intangibles capabilities and distinctive attributes naturally and through education that are valuable, rare,

difficult to imitate, and in most cases not replaceable which gives credence to the suitability of this theory for the current study.

The current study adapted resource-based theory as a baseline theory considering healthcare firms where the study is domiciled. The healthcare's employees help to create or implement strategies that enhance its efficiency and effectiveness in the marketplace, utilizing their capabilities in providing excellent customer service that in turn builds on the healthcare's reputations. This study proposed that contact employee motivation through due recognition for profound service delivery will contribute to their job satisfaction and in turn enhance their service quality delivery to the customers premise on the notion that, satisfied and loyal customers will express their loyalty through repeat patronage, resistance to switching and positive word of mouth (Butcher et al., 2001).

The Concept of Contact Employee Recognition

Contact employee recognition is an essential ingredient of motivation (Bansal et al., 2001) that entails the acknowledgment, appreciation, or approval of the positive accomplishments or behaviors of an individual or team (Mussie et al., 2013). Recognition is known to be praise or a personal note acknowledging achievements including small gestures that are important to employees (Gostick & Elton, 2007), and has been branded to be a motivational device that enriches employees' potency towards the attainment of organizational goals and objectives (Abena & Dorcas, 2016; Imran et al., 2014) and also has a significant positive relationship with employee service quality delivery (Rahim & Daud, 2013).

Contact employee recognition as considered by Harrison (2005) in Abena and Dorcas (2016) includes the appropriate, informal, or formal acknowledgment of an individual's behavior, effort, or accomplishment that is in harmony with the organization's goals and values, and which has been beyond normal expectations. The essence of recognition as expressed by Nyakundi et al. (2012) is to allow individuals to know and understand that their work is valued and appreciated, provides a sense of ownership and belongingness, improves morale, enhances loyalty, and increases employee retention rate in the organization (Abena & Dorcas, 2016). Besides, it has been empirically proven that employees who feel appreciated are more positive about themselves and their ability to offer customers a distinctive service delivery experience (Gostick & Elton, 2007). Given Nelson (2005), recognition ignites employees to offer their optimum in proffering solutions and novel ideas for a sustainable competitive edge, declined absenteeism, and exhibition of job satisfaction and loyalty behavior. As noted by Mussie et al. (2013) employees can be recognized or appreciated through letters or postcards, memory items that last, nonmonetary awards (DeCenzo & Robbins, 2010) that have trophy value, symbolic gestures by managers (Nelson & Spritzer, 2002), a picture displayed in a prominent place, having a room or hallway named after the employee, posting names in the organization's notice board or website, a video rental certificate, a coffee card, an event ticket, or a candy bar (Nelson, 2005).

Punke (2013) identified three methods of recognition programs (formal, informal, and day-to-day) that spread across performance-based and value-based initiatives which cohere with Saunderson (2004) three types of recognition (organization-wide formal recognition, departmental-specific informal recognition, and everyday spontaneous recognition) (Abena &

Dorcas, 2016). Formal recognition as submitted by Punke (2013), include structured recognition programs with clearly defined objectives, processes, and criteria linked to recognizing individuals, teams, or departments on a company-wide level for achieving specific business targets, exemplifying specific organizational values, or performing actions that go above and beyond normal work expectations. Informal recognition, on the other hand, focuses primarily on performance achievements, goal accomplishments, and other milestones by individuals or teams that may occur monthly or quarterly (Abena & Dorcas, 2016). This recognition program points out employee value and contribution at the right moment as a result of its instantaneous nature and the continuous changing work environment (Punke, 2013) with low-cost awards, refreshments, point-value incentives, gift cards, and certificates (WorldatWork Report, 2011) as means of acknowledgment. While day-to-day recognition is a type of recognition mechanism that are frequent (daily or weekly), low or no cost, often intangible and often reliant on interpersonal skills for the positive feedback that can be given to all employees (Abena & Dorcas, 2016; WorldatWork Report, 2011).

According to Harrison (2005), day-to-day recognition brings the benefit of immediate and powerful reinforcement of desired behavior and sets an example to other employees of desired behavior that aligns with organizational objectives. To him, it gives individuals and teams at all levels, the opportunity to recognize good work by other employees and teams, and it also allows them to be recognized on the spot for their good work. Petterson and Luthans (2006) suggested that the conceptual differentiation between formal recognition and social recognition (informal and day-to-day recognition) is very important. Although social recognition has been given relatively less attention than formal recognition, considerable research has shown that if social recognition is provided on a contingent basis in managing employee behavior, it can be a powerful incentive motivator for performance improvement (Peterson & Luthans, 2006) as cited in Abena and Dorcas (2016).

Concept of Customer Loyalty

Khan (2013) citing Bagdonienė and Jakštaitė (2007) established that customer loyalty is the highest valuable result of marketing efforts, thus the improvement on customer loyalty has become an imperative focus of achievement for every organization. It is a win-win relationship for both the organization and the customer (Khan, 2013) if the organization can win the confidence of the customer through its product offering and service delivery quality.

Customers exhibit their loyalty through certain behaviors (like resisting offers from the competition, sticking with the firm, recommending the organization and its offerings to others, and working with the organization when they experience a service breakdown) that benefit organizations in terms of reputation and improved revenue (AchieveGlobal, 2008). Besides, the organization also benefits in terms of lower price sensitivity (Khan, 2013) and reduced expenditure on attracting new customers. This gives credence to why customer loyalty has been one of the most recurrent topics of investigation (Didia & Idenedo, 2017; Adepoju & Suraju 2012) with regards to how firms can improve their performance to gain a sustainable prime place in a competitive space. This is also reflected in business mechanisms such as internal marketing mechanisms, as managers increasingly recognize the imperative of customer loyalty (Didia & Idenedo, 2017).

Customer loyalty is not won by chance; research has it that, it is a function of satisfying customer's expectations because customers compare their subjective perceptions after purchasing a product/service with their expectations before the purchase decision (AchieveGlobal, 2008; Kotler, Keller, 2009; Khan, 2013). This comparison according to Kotler and Keller (2009) leads to a situation of satisfaction if satisfaction exceeds expectations (customer enthusiasm). Though, the nexus between customer satisfaction and its loyalty is not unswervingly comparative because the evaluation of satisfaction relative to the performance of the service provider or product offered differs with customers (Kotler & Keller, 2009). This implied that customers can be satisfied but for different reasons.

Customer loyalty as asserted by Bruhn (2001) is part of a cause-effect sequence that involves processes from the initial contact with the client to the economic success of the organization. According to Bruhn (2001), the stages begin with the customer's first contact with the tendered by the purchase of a product or service, compare previous expectations with the product or service, and assess the level of satisfaction. If the customer's assessment is favorable or customer expectations have been exceeded, customer loyalty will be triggered and that will build his/her trust for the organization's offerings and willingness to patronize the same product/service in the future. The mentioned sequences transpire into loyalty when this purchasing conviction becomes repeated purchase and the product or service is being recommended to other potential customers and end when it has resulted in the economic success of the enterprise (Bruhn, 2001).

Similarly, Daffy (2009) stressed that customer loyalty does not result from strategies implemented by an organization or customer club rather through a good understanding of customers' needs and behavior. As such, he defined loyalty as a physical and emotional commitment given by customers in exchange for meeting their expectations. Budică and Barbu (2010) explained the emotion mentioned in Daffy's (2009) definition of loyalty as the positive or negative feelings brought to mind by an object or idea.

Customer loyalty is customers' predisposition to prefer one brand and its products over those of the competitors, based on the satisfaction they derive from using the brand's products (Didia & Idenedo, 2017) or other psychological, economic, or social reasons. Customer loyalty encourages consumers to shop more frequently, consistently, and often inform increase in volume or value of purchases (Sima & Elham, 2015). Customer loyalty is the willingness of customers to purchase the company's products, instead of those of competing brands; and maintain a profitable relationship with the preferred brand (Kendal, 2012; Mohammad et al., 2012; Inamullah, 2012). This implies that there must be something attractive in a brand that motivates a customer to be consistent with the purchase of the brand's product over time without shifting to competing brands (Mohammad et al., 2012). Loyalty is, therefore, the result of customers' past positive experiences with the brand. Customers return to a company for further business based on these positive experiences; regardless of whether the firm has the best product, price, or service delivery (Singh & Khan, 2012; Ghavami & Olyaei, 2006).

Apart from the result of customers' past positive experiences with the brand as asserted by Singh and Khan (2012) and Ghavami and Olyaei (2006) as a possible function of customer loyalty, Daffy (2009) established an equation (Loyalty = Satisfaction + Affinity + Involvement) to explain loyalty. Daffy (2009) explained further that, to gain customer loyalty, the organization

should make sure its products or services meet and exceed customer expectations. By involvement, Daffy implies a relationship between the organization and the customer that will enhance their decision quality based on feedback from customers while affinity occurs when there is satisfaction and involvement. Daffy's loyalty equation was the premise on the notion that an increase in customer loyalty is possible if all resources and processes are focused on customers' needs and expectations and involving them in the process of discovering their needs and desires makes them feel appreciated (Kotler & Keller, 2009).

Measures of Customer Loyalty

Customer loyalty is behavioral and attitudinal (Kabir, & Rafe, 2012; Inamullah, 2012) and often a combination of (Ebenuwa & Otite, 2019 citing Bowen & Chen, 2001) both known as composite loyalty for which each broad measure has sub-measures. Customers exhibit behavioral loyalty by willingly repeating patronage and maintaining relationships with the organization, the attitudinal loyalty is expressed through an exhibition of positive feelings about the organization and its offering and voluntarily telling others about the organization and its offerings (Ebenuwa & Otite, 2019) while the composite measures capture elements of both behavioral and attitudinal measures (Bowen & Chen, 2001). Butcher et al. (2001) identify repeat purchase, positive word-of-mouth, resistance to switching, and brand preference as dimensions of loyalty that cut across the behavioral, attitudinal, and composite dimensions of loyalty. This study thus adapts resistance to switching, repeat patronage, and positive word of mouth as measures of customer loyalty.

Resistance to Switching: Resistance to switching is considered as customers' attitudinal expression of loyalty to an organization's brand or services (Butcher et al., 2001; Cronin & Taylor, 1992). Conventionally, customers tend to switch amongst similar brands or services when their perceptions do not match with their expectations in terms of quality, availability, and the price tag for a service (Sirius, 2009). Besides, attractive promotional offers of other brands such as attractive gifts or discounts could also encourage trying another brand (Shahpar, 2014).

Conversely, Reichheld (1996) as cited in Rahim et al. (2013) posits that unsatisfied customers may choose not to switch, because they do not expect to receive better service elsewhere or if the switching cost is high and satisfied customers may seek for competitors because they believe they might receive better service elsewhere. This implies that there is another factor that triggered resistance to switching behavior other than satisfaction with services experienced as compared with expectations. Given that, some marketing scholars (Rahim et al., 2013; Lopez et al., 2008; Watson et al., 2002) considered customers resistance to switching not just an indication of being satisfied with an organizations' brand or services but also a function of the switching decision which includes; the cost of the decision, the perceived benefits of any such decision, and a customer's relative assessment of other factors. The switching costs according to Nicolas et al. (2018) include financial and search effort costs. These switching costs are barriers to switching and they act as factors that make it difficult and costly for consumers to change service providers (Nicolas et al., 2018; Jones et al., 2000).

Customers switching amongst similar brands or services could be triggered by certain events of times and market disruptions. Son et al. (2010) defined market disruptions as major events

occurring in the market that threaten customers' loyalty or relationship with a brand. According to Son et al. (2010), the events are not individual firm service failures rather; they include aggressive competitors' sales promotion, industry crises, product recalls, negative publicity, and disruptive innovations by competitors that can influence the relative standing of brands in the eyes of customers. As such, customer resistance to switching even at intervals of time and market disruptions are an exhibition of loyalty to an organizations' brand or services.

Repeat Patronage: Repeat patronage is a behavioral (Butcher et al., 2001) demonstration of loyalty by customers through repetitive patronage of a preferred brand or service amidst competitors as a result of being consistently satisfied psychologically, economically, socially, emotionally, physically, and intellectually (Nwulu & Asiegbu, 2015) with the brand or service experienced. Considering the healthcare firms, patients will usually repeat patronage of healthcare services when their service experience exceeds their expectations. Patients would not mind resisting events of times and market disruptions if their service experience with a particular healthcare firm is consistently exceeding their expectation of service economically, psychologically, and physically.

As described by Kumar (2016) cited in Nwadike et al. (2020), repeat patronage is behavior in which customers frequently patronize a product and service of a particular company without considering the products and services offered by other competing organizations. This coheres with Panda's (2013) assertion that, repeat patronage is a behavior whereby consumers repeatedly purchase their needs from a particular company even though there are other companies rendering the same services. Similarly, Curtis et al. (2011) defined repeat patronage as a consumer's actual behavior resulting in the purchase of the same product or service on more than one occasion.

Nwulu and Asiegbu (2015) considered repeat patronage as a measure of loyalty to a brand by consumers. Based on their analysis, higher repeat patronage value means a well retained and satisfied customer and thus recommend service providers to take some actions to ensure repeat patronage of their services by listening to customer comments, suggestions, and feedback, complaints, about the services they are offering and providing value-adding services to the customer experience.

Word-of-Mouth: Delighted and loyal customers consciously and unconsciously exhibit loyalty behaviourally by willingly repeating patronage and maintaining relationships with the organization and attitudinally through an exhibition of positive feelings about the organization and its offerings and voluntarily telling others about the organization and its offerings (Idenedo & Ebeonuwa, 2019). Positive word-of-mouth is indirect marketing through a satisfied and loyal customer by making strong recommendations and praises about a brand or its products to potential consumers (Susanta et al., 2013) and because potential customers see information from friends or even strangers as more unbiased and reliable than those of an economic entity (Brown & Peter, 1987), it is thus acknowledged by academics and business practitioners as one of the reasons customer loyalty is believed to be invaluable (Didia & Idenedo, 2017; Peter et al., 2013).

Susanta et al. (2013) as cited in Didia and Idenedo (2017) dramatized the imperative of positive word-of-mouth by stating that, increasing loyalty is achieved by maintaining customers while an increase in market share is achieved through positive word-of-mouth. Empirical literature gave

credence that, positive word-of-mouth enhances companies' ability to acquire new customers and maintain the loyalty of existing ones (Alhulail et al., 2018; Peter et al., 2013) hence; it is considered as one of the strongest marketing techniques. Muhammed and Peter (2019) in a study on word of mouth communication: a mediator of relationship marketing and customer loyalty found a significant positive association between the word of mouth and customer loyalty. Peter et al. (2013) established that positive word-of-mouth has a direct association with customers' repeated purchase behavior which indicates consumer loyalty.

Similarly, Brown et al. (2005) study on word-of-mouth facets in eateries established that there is a substantial link between word-of-mouth and customer loyalty and added that the effect of positive or negative word-of-mouth on customer loyalty differs significantly from industry to industry; while Liyander and Stradvick (1995) advocated the imperative of positive word-of-mouth for brand success because it removes qualms and convinces potential customers. Word-of-mouth is said to (Didia & Idenedo, 2017) serve as a switching barrier by influencing customer excitement and blocking customers from breaking the connection even when inconsistencies are observed in the firm's service delivery and boosts customer confidence in the company, its services and makes customers feel they made the right choice (Muhammed & Peter, 2019).

Premised on the few cited empirical test postulation on the link between word-of-mouth and customer loyalty, it is deducible that, adequately satisfied customers will likely talk about their experience with the brand and possibly recommend it to friends and family which cohere with Mohammad et al. (2013) assertion that, if customers are satisfied, they will increase the volume or value of their purchases, and also tell others about their pleasurable experience with the brand. Since the most valuable asset of any company is its customer-ship (Ateke & Harcourt, 2017), and the survival of any business depends on customer satisfaction and loyalty, it will be an idea for healthcare companies in Nigeria specifically federal tertiary healthcare in South-South Nigeria to improve on their service delivery quality that will bring about positive customer experience, gain their positive word-of-mouth marketing and other loyalty behavior and attitudes.

Contact Employee Recognition and Customer Loyalty

The following empirical literature was looked at to establish the hypothesized association between contact employee recognition and customers loyalty.

Abena and Dorcas (2016) examined employee recognition, its benefits, and the various types of employee recognition programs. The proposed that employee recognition looked at from the perspective of formal, informal, and day-to-day, could motivate staff to ensure high performance in Ghanaian universities. It is thus recommended that the management of Ghanaian universities should commit credible resources to the design and implementation of employee recognition programs to yield the needed outcome.

Mussie et al. (2013) analyzed the effect of employee recognition, pay, and benefits on job satisfaction. The study surveyed and analyzed responses from university students in the U.S. (n = 457), Malaysia (n = 347), and Vietnam (n = 391). Employee recognition, pay, and benefits were found to have a significant impact on job satisfaction, regardless of home country income level

(high, middle, or low income) and culture (collectivist or individualist). However, the effect of benefits on job satisfaction was significantly more important for U.S. respondents than for respondents from Malaysia and Vietnam. The authors conclude that both financial and non-financial rewards have a role in influencing job satisfaction, which ultimately impacts employee performance.

Baskar and Rajkumar (2014) studied the impact of rewards and recognition on employee motivation. A descriptive research design was adopted for this study. It was discovered that there is a direct and positive relationship between rewards and recognition and job satisfaction and motivation. It was recommended that, if rewards and recognition offered to employees were to be altered, then there would be a corresponding change in work motivation and satisfaction. The direct translation of this could be that the better the rewards and recognition, the higher the levels of motivation and satisfaction, and possibly, therefore, the greater the levels of performance and productivity.

Robberts (2005) investigated the impact of rewards and recognition on employee motivation. A biographical and work motivation questionnaire was administered to respondents. The sample group (N= 184) consists of male and female employees on post-grade levels 5 to 12. The results of the research indicated that there is a positive relationship between rewards, recognition, and motivation. The results also revealed that women and employees from non-white racial backgrounds experienced lower levels of rewards, recognition, and motivation.

Anchored in the above empirical works, the current study assumed that;

Ho₁: The link between employee recognition and customers' resistance to switching is not significant.

Ho₂: The link between employee recognition and customers repeat patronage is not significant.

Ho₃: The link between employee recognition and customers' word of mouth is not significant.

The developed hypotheses were based on the assumptions exhibited on the operational conceptual framework below

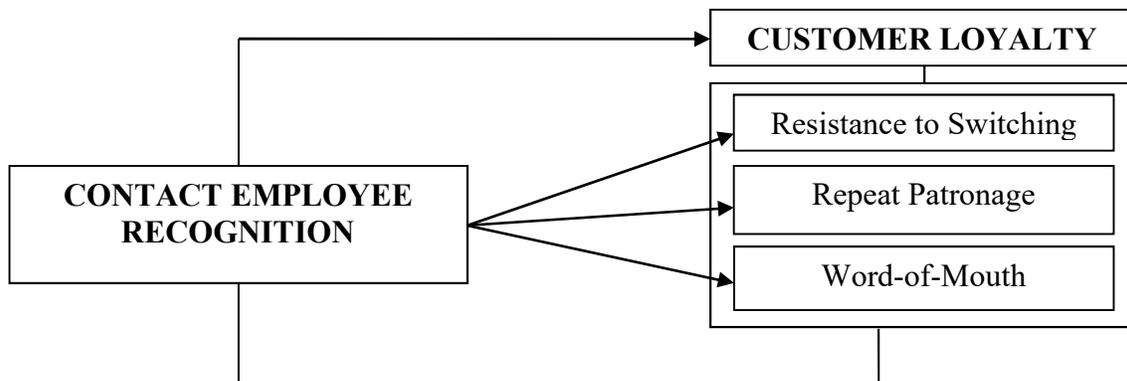


Figure 1: Operational Conceptual Framework of Contact Employee recognition and Customers Loyalty

Source: The study the measures were adapted from Butcher *et al.* (2001).

METHODOLOGY

This study aimed to examine the correlation between the contact employee rewards system and customer loyalty of healthcare firms in South-South, Nigeria. The study adopted an explanatory research design. The population of this study comprised federal tertiary healthcare providers specifically in South-South, Nigeria, and all in-patients admitted into each of the teaching hospitals. This study was directed at the teaching hospitals because they provide the widest admittance to patients with the completeness of all cadres of healthcare workers. Based on information obtained from the Federal Ministry of Health, December 2020, there are currently four (4) approved university-based federal tertiary healthcare providers in South-South, Nigeria. Namely: University of Port Harcourt Teaching Hospital with staff strength of 2500 and 800 beds space for patients. This information was obtained from info@upth.com; the University of Benin Teaching Hospital has staff strength of 3,840 and 850 beds space for patients. This information was obtained from info@ubth.com, University of Calabar Teaching Hospital with staff strength of 2,946 and 415 beds space for patients, and this information was obtained from info@ucth.com and University of Uyo Teaching Hospital with staff strength of 2000 and 500-bed spaces for patients and this information was obtained from info@uuth.com. In determining the sample size for this study, a census was taken for the current study. Eighteen (18) different contact employees and five (5) in-patients of each of the federal university teaching hospitals in South-South, Nigeria formed the study's sample unit, thereby making a total of ninety-eight (98) respondents that participated in this study. The table below exhibits the breakdown of the sampled respondents.

Table 1: Categories of Respondents

| S/N | Categories Of Staff Sampled | UPTH | UCTH | UBTH | UUTH |
|-----|-----------------------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| 1 | Nurse | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 |
| 2 | Administration | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 |
| 3 | Doctor | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 |
| 4 | Lab scientist | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 |
| 5 | Pharmacist | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 |
| 6 | Health assistant | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 |
| 7 | Paramedic | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 |
| 8 | Physiotherapy | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 |
| 9 | Optometry | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 |
| | Total Sampled | 18 Staff | 18 Staff | 18 Staff | 18 Staff |

| S/N | Patients Sampled | UPTH | UCTH | UBTH | UUTH |
|-----|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|
| 1 | In-Patients | 5 | 5 | 5 | 5 |
| | Total Sampled | 5 In-Patients | 5 In-Patients | 5 In-Patients | 5 In-Patients |

These categories of employees were used for this study because they constitute service contacts of each of the federal universities teaching hospitals in South-South, Nigeria. In the healthcare, patients often interact with contact employees (nurse, administration, doctor, lab scientist, pharmacist, health assistant, paramedic, physiotherapy, optometry and etc.) whose role is an ingredient of differentiation. Contact employees could influence service quality perception of patient through their attitude and service delivery while five in-patients were considered enough to provide the necessary information needed for the study.

Questionnaire was utilized as the instrument of primary data collection. Respondents were required to tick from 1-5 on a Likert scale, where 1= strongly disagree; 2= disagree; 3= neutral; 4= agree; 5= strongly agree. To justify the study instrument, a comprehensive reliability test was conducted, with a threshold of 0.7 set by Nunnally (1978); while the opinion of scholars and practitioners with relevant experience on the study constructs was used to validate the instrument. Table 1 below displays the summary of the test of reliability.

Table 2: Result of Reliability Analysis

| Variables | Dimensions/Measures | No. Items | Cronbach's Alpha |
|--------------------------|-------------------------|-----------|------------------|
| Rewards System | Rewards System | 5 | 0.967 |
| | Resistance to Switching | 5 | 0.844 |
| Customers Loyalty | Repeat Patronage | 5 | 0.842 |
| | Word of Mouth | 5 | 0.935 |

Source: SPSS Output of Data Analysis on Rewards System and Customers Loyalty (2020).

DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULT

Table 3: Questionnaire Analysis

| Numbers | Questionnaire | Percent |
|------------------|---------------|---------|
| No. Sent out | 98 | 100.0 |
| No. Returned | 85 | 87.0 |
| No. Not Returned | 13 | 13.0 |

Source: Field Survey Data 2020

Table 3 shows that a total of 98 copies of the questionnaire were distributed, out of which 85 representing (87%) were retrieved while 13 representing (13%) were not retrieved. However, 85 representing (85%) of the retrieved questionnaire were useful. The 13 (13%) of the not retrieved questionnaire were not correctly filled and were consequently discarded.

Having analyzed the questionnaire, the various hypotheses proposed for this study were subjected to statistical tests using the Spearman's Rank Order Correlation Co-Efficient Statistical Tool.

Table 4: Description of the Degree of Association between Variables

| Correlation Coefficient (r) | Description/Interpretation |
|-----------------------------|----------------------------|
| ± 0.80 – 1.0 | Very Strong |
| ± 0.60 – 0.79 | Strong |
| ± 0.40 – 0.59 | Moderate |
| ± 0.20 – 0.39 | Weak |
| ± 0.00 – 0.19 | Very Weak |

Source: SPSS Output of Data Analysis on Contact Employee Recognition and Customers Loyalty (2022).

The positive (+) sign in the value of r indicates a direct/positive relationship while the negative (-) sign in value of r indicates an indirect/negative or inverse relationship. Therefore, the sign of the r-value explains the direction of association or nature of the relationship between the variables.

Decision Rule

Reject the null hypothesis (H0) if $PV < 0.05$ for the 2-tailed test and conclude that a significant relationship exists.

Table 4.5.: Correlation Analysis on Recognition and Resistance to Switching

| Correlations | | Recognition | Resistance to Switching |
|-------------------------|-------------------------|-------------|-------------------------|
| Spearman's rho | Recognition | 1.000 | .722** |
| | Correlation Coefficient | . | .000 |
| | Sig. (2-tailed) | 85 | 85 |
| Resistance to Switching | Resistance to Switching | .722** | 1.000 |
| | Correlation Coefficient | .000 | . |
| | Sig. (2-tailed) | 85 | 85 |

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

Source: SPSS Output of Data Analysis on Contact Employee Recognition and Customers Loyalty (2022)

Table 4.5 above shows that Spearman's correlation coefficient (r) = 0.722**, this value is high and it indicates that a strong relationship exists between recognition and resistance to switching. The positive sign of the correlation coefficient shows that the relationship between the variables is positive. Therefore, an increase in resistance to switching behavior exhibited by the customers is associated with the level of satisfaction derived by the service contacts of the studied healthcare provider firms through the firms' employees' recognition practice. As shown in Table 4.5, the probability value is $(0.000) < (0.05)$ level of significance; hence the researcher rejects the null hypothesis and concludes that employees recognition significantly relates to customers' resistance to switching.

Table 4.6.: Correlation Analysis on Recognition and Repeat Patronage

| Correlations | | Recognition | Repeat Patronage |
|------------------|-------------------------|-------------|------------------|
| Spearman's rho | Correlation Coefficient | 1.000 | .692** |
| | Sig. (2-tailed) | . | .000 |
| | N | 85 | 85 |
| Repeat Patronage | Correlation Coefficient | .692** | 1.000 |
| | Sig. (2-tailed) | .000 | . |
| | N | 85 | 85 |

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

Source: SPSS Output of Data Analysis on Contact Employee Recognition and Customers Loyalty (2022)

Table 4.6 explains Spearman's correlation coefficient (r) = 0.692**, this value is high and it indicates that a strong relationship exists between recognition and repeat patronage. The positive sign of the correlation coefficient shows that the relationship between the variables is positive. Therefore, an increase in repeat patronage behavior exhibited by the customers is a function of the level of satisfaction derived by the service contacts of the studied healthcare provider firms through the firms' employees' recognition practice. The probability value is $(0.000) < (0.05)$ level of significance; hence the researcher rejects the null hypothesis and concludes that employees recognition significantly relates to customers' repeat patronage.

Table 4.7.: Correlation Analysis on Recognition and Word of Mouth

| Correlations | | Recognition | Word of Mouth |
|----------------|-------------|-------------------------|---------------|
| Spearman's rho | Recognition | Correlation Coefficient | 1.000 |
| | | Sig. (2-tailed) | .000 |
| | | N | 85 |
| Word of Mouth | | Correlation Coefficient | .678** |
| | | Sig. (2-tailed) | .000 |
| | | N | 85 |

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

Source: SPSS Output of Data Analysis on Contact Employee Recognition and Customers Loyalty (2022)

Table 4.7 above shows that Spearman's correlation coefficient (r) = 0.678**, this value is high and it means that, a strong relationship exists between recognition and word of mouth. The positive sign of the correlation coefficient shows that the relationship between the variables is positive. Therefore, an increase in positive word of mouth attitude exhibited by the customers is a function of the level of satisfaction derived by the service contacts of the studied healthcare provider firms through the firms' employees' recognition practice. The probability value is $(0.000) < (0.05)$ level of significance; hence the researcher rejects the null hypothesis and concludes that employees recognition significantly relates to customers' word of mouth.

Discussion of Findings

Strong Positive Relationship between Recognition and Customers Loyalty

The three hypotheses tested on the link between recognition and measures of customer loyalty show a strong positive relationship. In Table 4.5 the Spearman's correlation coefficient (r) = 0.722**, this value is high and it indicates that a strong relationship exists between recognition and resistance to switching. In Table 4.6 the Spearman's correlation coefficient (r) = 0.692**, this value is high and it indicates that a strong relationship exists between recognition and repeat patronage. The information in Table 4.7 shows that Spearman's correlation coefficient (r) = 0.678**, this value is high indicating a strong relationship exists between recognition and word of mouth. These findings validate previous studies on recognition's results. For instance, Abena and Dorcas (2016) examined employee recognition, its benefits, and the various types of employee recognition programs. The study revealed that employee recognition looked at from the perspective of formal, informal, and day-to-day, could motivate staff to ensure high performance in Ghanaian universities. Mussie et al. (2013) analyzed the effect of employee recognition, pay, and benefits on job satisfaction. Employee recognition, pay, and benefits were found to have a significant impact on job satisfaction, regardless of home country income level (high, middle, or low income) and culture (collectivist or individualist). Christiane et al. (2013) investigated the causal effect of public recognition on employee performance. The results of the study were consistent with workers having a preference for conformity and being reciprocal at the same time. Also, Baskar and Prakash (2014) studied the impact of rewards and recognition on employee motivation. It was discovered that there is a direct and positive relationship between rewards and recognition and job satisfaction and motivation. Robberts (2005) investigated the impact of rewards and recognition on employee motivation. The results of the research indicated that there is a positive relationship between rewards, recognition, and motivation.

CONCLUSION(S) AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Premised on the findings, the study, therefore, concludes that contact employee recognition significantly relates to customers loyalty, and customer's loyalty is expressed as resistance to switching, repeat patronage, and word of mouth is a function of contact employee's recognition

of the healthcare providers. As such, the study recommends that healthcare firms should put in place appropriate contact employees recognition packages to motivate and improve performance. Healthcare providers should consider the various employee recognition methods discussed in the literature imperative to improve on customers' resistance to switching behavior, repeat patronage, and positive word of mouth.

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