INFLUENCE OF CORE SERVICE AND SERVICE ENCOUNTER FAILURES AS INCIDENTS OF SWITCHING COSTS ON CUSTOMER RETENTION IN FOOD SERVICE ESTABLISHMENTS IN UMUAHIA, ABIA STATE

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ABSTRACT: This study sought to determine the influence of core service and service encounter failures as incidents of switching costs on customer retention in food service establishments in Umuahia metropolis Abia State. It was a descriptive survey research in which two specific objectives and two research hypotheses guided the study. The researcher purposively used 300 customers of six reputable food service establishments in the study area as sample size. The research instrument used for data collection was a questionnaire on a 4-point scale which was subjected to reliability test that produced a reliability co-efficient of 0.79 proving the usability of the instrument, while accessibility sampling technique was used in the administration of the instrument. Descriptive and inferential statistics on SPSS version 24 were used to analyze the data generated. Findings revealed that core service failure did not significantly influence customer retention in the study area as indicated by adjusted R square value of 0.113 and F value of 0.818 significant at p=0.000F. Conversely, service encounter failure as incident of switching costs was found to have a significant influence on customer retention in the study area as indicated by adjusted R square value of 0.616 and F value of 4.864 significant at p=0.000F. On the strength of the findings, it is concluded that core service and service encounter failures as incidents of switching costs can influence customer retention in food service establishments in Umuahia. In view of the foregoing, it is recommended that operators of food service establishments are to ensure that there is continuous improvement in the functional and technical aspects of their operations to mitigate core service failures and that service providers should be regularly trained to enhance their skills, service orientation, and improve service provider-service consumer relationship thereby mitigating service encounter failures.

Keywords: Foodservice, core service, service encounter, switching costs, customer retention.

INTRODUCTION

Consumer behaviour has attracted a lot of research interests among marketers and academics due to how important consumers are as well as how easily they switch or defect. Consumer behaviour is rational and largely unpredictable thus raising the question as to why consumers act the way they do. Consumer behaviour has been defined as the process and activities people engage in when searching, selecting, purchasing, using, evaluating, and disposing of products and services so as to satisfy needs and desires (Baker & Cameron, 2016). Consumer behaviour mainly sheds light on how consumers decide to spend their various resources such as time, money, and ideas on various products and services so as to meet their needs and achieve satisfaction. In an attempt to understand consumers (customers) and the tendency for them to switch, Jones and Sasser (2015) divided customers into four groups: 1.Loyalists - customers who have high satisfaction and high loyalty; 2. Hostage- customers who have low satisfaction but high loyalty; 3.Mercenary- customers who have high satisfaction but low loyalty; and 4. Defectors- customers who have low satisfaction and low loyalty. Through the examples of hostage and mercenary classifications, Jones and Sasser (2015) explained that the level of customer satisfaction may not correspond with customer retention or loyalty and this might influence brand switching (switching behaviour). In a highly competitive market just like the food service sector, increasing the market share means persuading competitors' customers with weak loyalty-based (particularly consumers in mercenary and defectors' groupings) opinions and beliefs to defect (Fraering & Minor, 2013). Yu, Wu, Chiao and Tai (2015) maintain that as the features, quality, and appearance of products and services become increasingly similar just like food service offerings, customers are more likely to exhibit fickle and non-loyal purchasing behaviours – they switch. Moreover, there is an assortment of complex and interrelated factors that influence an individual's choice (Byker, Shanks, Misyak & Serrano, 2012).

Brand switching is most likely to occur in any market with multiple alternatives and inter-purchase frequencies. This is typical of food service market that is characterized with strikingly similar alternatives in terms of menu offerings. Notably, the market for food service is very dynamic considering the degree of change and innovations in menu offerings these days. Major food service companies in high demand leverage their competitive edge to enable them maintain their positions in the market and a positive brand image to explore new revenue streams and most importantly to achieve a sustainable product differentiation to drive sales. Brand switching has remained a re-occurring decimal in the annals of business occasioned by market disruptions and other major events occurring in product and service markets that threaten customer-brand relationships. Brand switching occurs when consumers are motivated to review available alternatives in the market due to competitive activities (Appaih, Ozuem & Howell, 2017). Socially, switching occurs when a customer's belief in a brand is externally influenced within the social setting (Gartner 2016). Thus, it can be said that brand switching is the process of being loyal to one product or service at one time and moving over to an alternative or rival product or service due to dissatisfaction. Brand switching indicates that the behaviour of consumers varies on the basis of their satisfaction levels with the service providers or companies. When consumers move from one brand to another, building a picture of a likely brand switching behaviour occurs.

One consequence of brand switching especially switching by high margin customers is the loss of revenue (Czajkowski & Sobolewski, 2013; Chang, Liu & Chen, 2013), coupled with shrinking market share. It is normally difficult to acquire new customers and even more difficult to retain the newly acquired customers as both operating and marketing costs must be incurred. Switching costs provide a unique and valid theoretical window into the mechanisms of consumer decision-making process as well as account for the behaviours of dissatisfied customers who still decide to patronize the same product or service. Therefore, switching costs provide a new research paradigm to consumer behaviour studies, which are currently dominated by benefit-based articulations (Whitten & Wakfield, 2006). The significance of switching costs emerges out of the recognition that even satisfied customers might still change products or services and demonstrate disloyal intentions and behaviours at some point (Azize & Hakan, 2013).

El-Manstrly (2016) views switching costs as some of the factors that contribute in maintaining relationships with customers, while Ngo, Phan, Nguyen, and Vu, (2019) see it is an important strategy that is used to lock customers from moving to other service providers. Caruana (2003) argues that customer commitment comes from emotional involvement represented by switching costs. Switching costs will not be incurred should customers remain loyal but must be borne by the customer should he switch. Therefore, switching costs are seen as the driving factors that motivate customers to stick to one product or service choice. The consumer's consideration when switching to another product is the implication of the cost or risk that will be received (Temerak & El-Manstryly, 2019; Amana, Handoko, Hafas, Hermansyur & Harahap, 2021). Thus, it can said that switching costs are costs incurred by a consumer as a result of changing brands, suppliers, services and products. While there is a broad agreement on what switching costs are, the constituents of switching costs are less definite.

Researchers have developed different models in an attempt to identify and classify switching costs. Klempere (1987) cited in Azize and Hakan (2013), argued that prior to an actual purchase, switching costs seem to be nonexistent but after a purchase is made, there appear to be hidden costs that are either imposed directly by the firms or indirectly by the very nature of the product or service purchased. The author classified the costs into three: transaction costs that occur when starting a new relationship with a new provider as well as the cost of terminating existing relationship; learning costs that represent the effort required by the customer to reach the same level of comfort of knowledge acquired of using a product but which may not be transferable to other brands of the same product; and contractual costs that are directly firm-induced in order to penalize switching by customers such as repeat-purchase discounts or rewards, frequent flyer programs among others. In some cases, customers (corporate) sign some kind of undertaking to remain loyal for certain period of time or pay exit penalty. Beside these explicit costs, there are also implicit switching costs that have psychological and emotional coloration. For instance, when service performance is less than satisfactory, a psychological exit barrier might prevent the customer from switching on account of social bonds, personal rapport and trust developed with the service provider over time. The customer will want to avoid the accompanying psychological and emotional stress and the risk and uncertainty that the termination of current relationship could bring.

Similarly, Wong, Chang, and Yeh (2019) classified switching costs into three: procedural switching costs related to time – economic risk costs (costs of the risk of uncertainty that arise when receiving new products or services), evaluation costs (costs of effort and time to seek information), learning costs (costs of effort and time to learn skills and knowledge to use the new product), set-up costs (cost of effort and time required to initiate a relationship with new product or service); financial switching costs related to monetary gain – benefit or loss costs (cost of a contractual bond that creates more value to stay afloat), monetary loss cost (cost of switching to a new provider); and relational switching costs related to emotional factors – personal relational loss cost (consumer emotional loss when having to break the relationship), brand relationship loss cost (consumer emotional loss when he or she has to break the relationship with brand identification that has been done so far). However, researchers maintain that if switching costs are deemed so high, the tendency to switch will not arise instead consumers will use an alternative deemed to have low switching costs as high switching costs restrain customers from changing brand relationships easily (Azize & Hakan, 2013; Temerak & El-Manstryly, 2019).

A review of literature suggests that higher switching costs are positively related to customer loyalty (Ping 1993; 1997; cited in Caruana, 2003). Jones and Sasser (1995) mentioned switching costs as one of the factors that determine the competitiveness of the market since high switching costs discourage changing from a current service provider thereby yielding less incentive for firms actively to compete. As customer satisfaction is strongly linked to impressions of performance, satisfaction and switching costs are assumed to be the most important antecedents of repurchase behaviour or the intention to repurchase a product or service. Researchers maintain that switching costs interact with satisfaction to influence loyalty (Caruana, 2003; Azize & Hakan, 2013; Temerak & El-Manstryly, 2019). Thus, high switching costs can as well influence customer retention since customer loyalty relates to customer retention as disloyal customers are hardly retained.

Customer retention is a link between customer loyalty and profitability, which is a form of loyalty related to consumer buying behaviour as indicated by the high frequency of a consumer buying a product or service. Customers behave to defend certain brands, either because of price or brand image (Huarng & Yu, 2020). Heesup, Shim, Lee, and Kim (2019) defined customer retention as the process of creating loyalty by fostering good relationships with customers. The purpose of marketing is to prevent customers from moving to other competitors (Larsson & Brostrom, 2019), which is a form of the future tendency of customers to remain loyal to the brand (Kim, 2019) and this very much means keeping the customers satisfied, loyal, and retained.

In food service operations, the birth of new brands or outfits with perceived new and diverse menu offerings might influence brand switching particularly for hedonic and variety seeking consumers. To gain a competitive edge, the incumbent firms focus on service improvement as a means to enhance customer value (Chen, Hsu & Lu, 2018). Keaveney (1995) formulated a model with eight switching incidents in an attempt to explain brand switching: pricing (price increase, unfair pricing practices); inconvenience (location, waiting time/hours); core service failures (billing errors, service catastrophes); service encounter failures (uncaring, impolite, unresponsive and unknowledgeable staff); employee response to service failures (reluctant response, failure to respond); attraction by competitors (consumers' positive responses related to the service provider they switched to); ethical problems (dishonest behaviour, intimidating behaviour, unsafe practices or conflict of interest) and involuntary switching, besides other seldom mentioned incidents (such as customer having shifted locations or service provider having changed alliance). Out of the eight switching incidents, only core service failure and service encounter failure are used in this present study to mediate the relationship between switching costs and customer retention.

Core Service Failures - include all critical incidents that occur in the course of service delivery that impact negatively on the service being delivered and ultimately on customer experience due to mistakes or other technical problems with the service itself such as billing errors, wrong order taking, serving at improper temperature, and other service catastrophes. From a customer's perspective, a service failure refers to a real or perceived service related problem, or where something has gone wrong in dealing with an organization (Palmer, 2001 in Gartner, 2016). Core service failure has been cited as the major reason for switching in the service sector (Keaveney 1995), meaning that core service failure may be the only reason for the switch or it may be combined with other reasons, which tilts the balance towards switching to another provider. Although, customers and organizations increasingly seek a flawless delivery of core and supplementary services, this is virtually impossible in a service setting due to human element in service production and consumption coupled with the characteristics of service that make service management difficult.

Service Encounter Failures – this relates to the quality of service delivery and maintenance of service performance relationships which potentially depend on the extent to which service providers and service consumers share similar beliefs about a service and its delivery. Service encounter points are critical points in service delivery that present opportunities for moment of truth when consumers match service promises with actual service delivered. Moment of truth is critical as it impacts on consumer behavioural intentions and loyalty and should be well managed. Congruent expectations facilitate maintenance of service relationships, while disparate or incongruous cognitions of expectations encumber and work toward terminating relationships (Burnham, Frels & Mahajian, 2003). Service switching, in any industry, is often the result of an ineffectual service exchange between the service provider and the service consumer, contrasting the perceptions of both parties may lead to a better understanding of switching behaviour.

Studies have been carried out in the past to determine the influence of switching costs on certain variables such as customer satisfaction, loyalty, brand association, brand advocacy, customer retention among others in different locations globally (Caruana, 2003; Czajkowski & Sobolewski, 2013; Chang*, et al*., 2013; Temerak & El-Manstryly, 2019 ; Heesup, et al., 2019; Ngo, et al., 2019). Also, findings of anterior studies indicate that switching costs could impact customer retention (Larsson and Brostrom, 2019; Kim, 2019; Amana, *et al.,* 2021). For instance, Azize and Hakan (2013) carried out a study to determine the role of switching costs on satisfaction-trust-commitment chain in Istanbul Turkey in which 457 customers served as respondents. Results revealed that switching costs have moderating effect on satisfaction, trust, and commitment. Similarly, Amana*, et al*., (2021) determined the influence of switching costs and brand trust on customer retention in which 120 Post Graduate students served as respondents in Egypt. Results revealed that switching costs and brand trust affect customer retention partially and simultaneously.

The intensity of competition in food service market means that operators of food service establishments must place high premium on increasing switching costs through quality service delivery that meets the needs and expectations of consumers thereby developing a long lasting relationship with them. Observations have however shown that customers of food service establishments in the study area are seemingly savvy, sophisticated, largely choosy and hedonic in their choice of food service establishments. With the growing health consciousness of the consumers coupled with the need to be more conscious of the quality of service received in view of the avalanche of attractive, tempting and strikingly similar menu alternatives the food service market can offer, it has become very imperative for food service operators to work towards raising the switching costs of their establishments to dissuade consumers from defecting. Findings of anterior studies indicate that switching costs could impact customer retention (Larsson & Brostrom, 2019; Kim, 2019; Amana, *et al*., 2021). This researcher is worried that operators of food service establishments in Umuahia metropolis might be ignorant of the influencing role of switching costs in achieving customer retention due to perceived literature gap, as not much has been done empirically on the subject matter particularly in the study area, hence the motivation for this present study.

Objectives of the Study

The main objective of the study is to determine the influence of core service and service encounter failures as incidents of switching costs on customer retention among customers of food service establishments in Umuahia metropolis. Specifically, the study sought to determine:

i. The influence of core service failure as an incident of switching costs on customer retention in the study area;
ii. The influence of service encounter failure as an incident of switching costs on customer retention in the study area.

Research Hypotheses

The following research hypotheses guided the study:

H_{01}: Core service failure as an incident of switching costs does not significantly influence customer retention among customers of food service establishments in the study area.

H_{02}: Service encounter failure as an incident of switching costs has no significant influence on customer retention among customers of food service establishments in the study area.

METHODOLOGY

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 characteristics.

Area of Study

The study was carried out in Umuahia, the capital of Abia State and it is located in South East geo-political zone of Nigeria. Umuahia is located within Latitude 5° 20' and 30^{0} N, of the Equator and Longitude 7° 40', and 7° 50' E of the Greenwich meridian. The geographical scope of the study however was limited to Umuahia metropolis. Notable food service establishments operate in Umuahia metropolis such as De Choice, Crunchies, Apples, Jovit, Chicken Republic, Roots, and Kilimanjaro.

Population for the Study

The population for this study included all customers of food service establishments in Umuahia metropolis of Abia State who visited these establishments during the period of this study (August and September, 2021). It is an infinite population.

Sample for the Study

The researcher purposively used 300 dinners drawn from different food service establishments in Umuahia as sample size. The least academic qualification of the dinners was West Africa Examination Council (WAEC) certificate. The breakdown of the establishments and the copies of the research instrument administered are presented as follows; Crunchies (50), De Choice (50), Roots (50), Kilimanjaro (50), Jovit (50), and Chicken Republic (50).

Instrument for Data Collection

The instrument for data collection was a 13-item questionnaire which had two sections. Section A sought to collect bio-data of the respondents, while section B contained measurements of variables of the study. The incidents of switching costs; core service failure had 6 items while service encounter failure had 7 items. 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.

Data collection technique

Accessibility sampling technique was used for the study thus only accessible customers were used for the study. This technique is widely used in tourism studies. This was achieved through the help of three research assistants (RAs). These RAs were trained on how to approach the respondents, administer and collect the data. All the copies of the instrument administered were retrieved on the spot. However, only 281 copies of the instrument were found usable for the study representing 93.7% of the total number administered.

Data Analysis Techniques

The data collected were analyzed using descriptive and parametric inferential statistics (simple regression analysis) on SPSS version 24.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Table 1: Descriptive statistics of the influence of core service failure as an incident of switching costs on customer retention in the study area

ITEMS	SD	D	A	SA	Total	Mean	Remark
1. I worry that the service offered by the other establishments will not work as well as expected.	8	0	83	190	281	3.62	Accepted
2. If I try to switch service provider, I might end up with a bad service for a while.	58	90	95	38	281	2.40	Rejected
3. I am likely to end up with a bad deal financially if I switch to a new service provider.	98	91	48	44	281	2.14	Rejected
4. I do not know what I will end up having to deal with while switching to a new service.	58	106	77	40	281	2.35	Rejected

5. Switching to a new service will probably result in some unexpected hassle.	68	64	77	72	281	2.54	Accepted
6. I cannot afford the time to get the information to evaluate fully another service provider	8	49	78	146	281	3.29	Accepted
Grand Mean						**2.72**	**Agreed**

Field Survey, 2021 Criterion 2.50

Table 1 shows that the respondents agreed only on 3 items (numbers 1, 5 & 6) on how core service failure as an incident of switching costs can influence customer retention in the study area as all met the mean score benchmark of 2.50. However, the respondents disagreed on 3 items (numbers 2, 3 & 4) meaning that the respondents disagreed that if they switch, they might end up with a bad service for a while, a bad deal financially, and do not know what to deal with while switching. The grand mean of 2.94 which is also above the mean score benchmark indicates that majority of the respondents agreed with the above listed interactions between pricing as an incident of switching costs and customer retention in the study area.

Table 2: Descriptive statistics of the influence of service encounter failure as an incident of switching costs on customer retention in the study area

ITEMS	SD	D	A	SA	Total	Mean	Remark
1. I worry that the service offered by the other establishments will not work as well as expected.	8	0	83	190	281	3.62	Accepted
2. If I try to switch service provider, I might end up with a bad service for a while.	58	90	95	38	281	2.40	Rejected
3. I am likely to end up with a bad deal financially if I switch to a new service provider.	98	91	48	44	281	2.14	Rejected
4. I do not know what I will end up having to deal with while switching to a new service.	58	106	77	40	281	2.35	Rejected
5. Switching to a new service will probably result in some unexpected hassle.	68	64	77	72	281	2.54	Accepted
6. I cannot afford the time to get the information to evaluate fully another service provider	8	49	78	146	281	3.29	Accepted
Grand Mean						**2.72**	**Agreed**

Field Survey, 2021 Criterion 2.50

Table 2 shows that the respondents agreed on 5 items (numbers 1, 2, 3, 4, & 6) on how service encounter failure as an incident of switching costs can influence customer retention in the study area as all met the mean score benchmark of 2.50. However, the respondents disagreed on 2 items (5 & 7) as they recorded mean scores of 2.09 and 2.43 respectively which are below the mean score bench mark of 2.50. This means that the respondents disagreed that service quality is how the consumers judge the service encounter, and that effective service delivery is vital to maintain customer and employee satisfaction and loyalty which in turn contribute significantly to a company's revenue, growth and profitability. Thus items 5 and 7 were rejected. The grand mean of 2.57 which is also above the mean score benchmark indicates that majority of the respondents agreed with the above listed interactions between service encounter failure as an incident of switching costs and customer retention in the study area.

Inferential Statistics and Hypothesis Testing

H_{01}: Core service failure as an incident of switching costs does not significantly influence customer retention among customers of food service establishments in the study area.

Table 3 **Model Summary**

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	F	Sig.
1	.627[a]	.616	.613	78.0119	4.864	.028[b]

a. Predictors: (Constant), Service encounter failure

Table 3 shows the results of Regression analysis conducted with customer retention as the dependent variable and core service failure as the independent variable. The adjusted R square is 0.113, revealing that 11.3% of customer retention is explained by core service failure as an incident of switching costs in the study area. The F value of 0.818 which is not significant at p=0.000, indicates that core service failure explained the 11.3% of the core service failure relationship with customer retention at the 1% significant level. Therefore, the null hypothesis which states that core service failure as an incident of switching costs does not significantly influence customer retention among customers of food service establishments in the study area was accepted and the alternative hypothesis rejected. This finding is in line with the results obtained by Keaveney, 1995; Gartner, 2016; Larsson and Brostrom, 2019; Ngo, et al., 2019. Core service failure relates to critical incidents that occur in the course of service delivery (mistakes or other technical problems with the service itself such as billing errors, wrong order taking, serving at improper temperature, and other service catastrophes).These service flaws impact negatively on customer experience which is the only thing that the customer takes home and it shapes and influences future purchases. Core service failure has been cited as the major reason for switching in the service sector (Keaveney 1995; Sathish, Naveen & Jeevanantham, 2011; Pick 2014), meaning that core service failure may be the only reason for the switch or it may be combined with other reasons, which tilt the balance towards switching to another provider and this affects customer loyalty and retention.

H_{02}: Service encounter failure as an incident of switching costs has no significant influence on customer retention among customers of food service establishments in the study area.

Table 4 **Model Summary**

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	F	Sig.
1	.627[a]	.616	.613	78.0119	4.864	.028[b]

a. Predictors: (Constant), Service encounter failure

Table 4 shows the results of Regression analysis conducted with customer retention as the dependent variable and Service encounter failure as an incident of switching costs as the independent variable. The adjusted R square is 0.616 revealing that 61.6% of customer retention is explained by service encounter failure variable. The F value of 4.864 which is significant at p=0.000, indicates that service encounter failure as an incident of switching costs explained the 61.6% of the service encounter failure relationship with customer retention at the 1% significance level. Therefore, the null hypothesis was rejected and the alternative hypothesis accepted which states that service encounter failure as an incident of switching costs significantly influences customer retention among customers of food service establishments in the study area. This result is in conformity with the result obtained by Yanamandram and White (2006), who found that switching costs behavioural loyalty is heavily dependent on service encounter failure or success amongst customers. Service encounter failure relates to the quality of service delivery and maintenance of service performance relationships which potentially depend on the extent to which service providers and service consumers share similar beliefs about a service and its delivery. Service encounter points are critical points in service delivery that present opportunities for moment of truth, a period when consumers match service promises with actual service delivered. Moment of truth is critical as it impacts on consumer behavioural intentions and loyalty and should be well managed. Congruent expectations facilitate maintenance of service relationships, while disparate or incongruous cognitions of expectations encumber and work toward terminating relationships (Burnham, Frels & Mahajian, 2003). Service switching, is often the result of an ineffectual service exchange between the service provider and the service consumer.

Conclusion

The results of the study have shown that core service failure and service encounter failure as incidents of switching costs can influence customer retention in food service establishments in the study area. It is therefore suggested that future researchers should carry out further studies in other food service systems (e.g hotels) to determine the influence of other incidents of switching costs on customer retention in different locations while using different methodologies. Finally, core service failure and service encounter failure as incidents of switching costs should be seen as critical factors in achieving customer retention in food service establishments.

Recommendations

1. Operators of food service establishments are to ensure that there is continuous improvement in the functional and technical aspects of their operations to mitigate core service failures eliminate avoidance tendencies and guarantee customer retention.
2. Operators of food service establishments are to ensure that service providers are regularly trained to enhance their skills, service orientation, and improve service provider - service consumer relationship thereby mitigating service encounter failures.

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