

Effect of Service Staff Hygiene on Customer Patronage of Restaurants in Port Harcourt

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Abstract

The aim of this study was to ascertain the extent of the relationship between Service Staff Hygiene and Customer Patronage of Restaurants in Port Harcourt. This study adopted causal research, involving cross sectional survey design and used structured copies of questionnaire. The instrument contained 25 item questions weighted with 5-point Likert measurement scale to collect data from Three Hundred and Eighty-Four (384) customers of restaurants in Port Harcourt which constituted the sample size as drawn from the infinite population. The internal consistency of the measuring item was subjected to test of reliability using Cronbach alpha tool at 0.70 as a benchmark for acceptance (Nunnally 1978). Regression analyses was adopted as analytical tools for data analyses. The study unveiled a very strong relationship between Service Staff Hygiene and customer retention and customer commitment. This study therefore concluded that increased customer patronage in the restaurant sector can be achieved if Service Staff Hygiene is improved by restaurant owners.

Keywords: Service, Hygiene, Customer Patronage, Restaurant, Service Staff

1. Introduction

Consumers purchase a product or service on the basis of satisfying their recognized needs (palmer, 2001). The choice of this product to satisfy particular needs depends on the perception of the consumer about the product quality being capable of satisfying that need. According to Perrault (1997), many business Managers get wrapped up in the technical details involved in producing a product, but most customers or consumers think about product in terms of the quality and the total satisfaction it provides. As one of the most critical factors influencing customer satisfaction and future behaviors, service quality has been extensively researched within the service marketing field. Service quality is often viewed from two perspectives: the customer's cognitive evaluation of the service provided (Taylor & Baker, 1994). Quality is a function of value the customer receives in exchange for his/her money which includes the hygienic state of the restaurant where the service is being offered. According to Wilson, Zeithaml, Bitner & Gremler (2008) service staff are critical to the success of any service organization as they are considered the organization's most important asset, being capable of achieving and sustaining competitive advantage. In the light of this, this paper examined the effect of service staff hygiene on customer patronage of restaurants in Rivers State.

2.1 Theoretical and Conceptual Framework of the Study

Expectancy disconfirmation theory by Vroom (1964) argues that mental process of motivation is the basis for every purchase decision. This motivation is determined by the customers' degree of desire and the likelihood of the desire to be met by the firm. As stated by Daft & Marcic (2012) "expectancy theory is based on the relationship among an individual's effort, the individual's performance, and the desirability of outcomes associated with high performance". Customer who visit restaurants are motivated by desire and expectations they have concerning such service offering and when those desires are actualized, consumers can be motivated for a future visit.

Attribution theory associated with Weiner, Frieze, Kukla, and Reed (1971) explains that majority of customers in the restaurant sector see service as a bundle of attributes and characteristics which customers assign different levels of importance to depending on the need. Customers' judgment before a restaurant is visited is dependent on the value of the offering (attributes and importance). Attribution theory also helps customers to evaluate a purchase experience whether it is satisfactory or not using the key quality attributes.

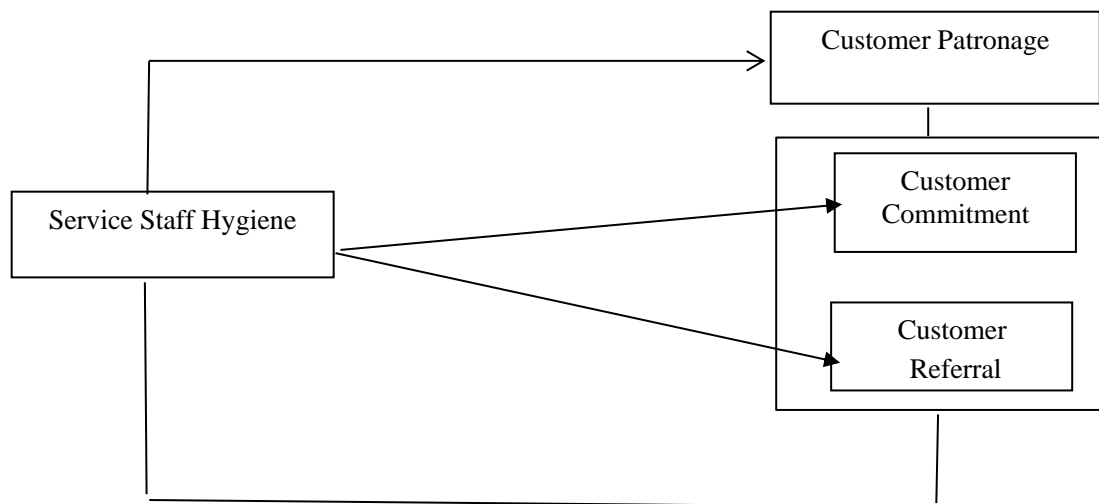


Figure 2 Conceptual Framework of the Relationship between Service Staff Hygiene and Customer Patronage.

2.2 The Concept of Service Staff Hygiene and Customer Patronage

Services in the restaurant sector are delivered by people in real time and require staff that are quality consciousness while delivering value to customers. According to Wilson, Zeithaml, Bitner & Gremler (2008) service staff is critical to the success of any service organization as they are considered the organization's most important asset, being capable of achieving and sustaining competitive advantage. Customer service staffs are those members of firms with whom customers make their first contact in their interaction with the firm. These employees have been identified by various appellations including customer contact employees (Bowen & Hallowell, 2002), boundary

spanning employees (Czepiel, 1990), and front-line personnel (Crosby, Evans, & Cowles, 1990). Service staff link the firm and its customers; and also manage and sustain relationships with customers (Payne & Webber, 2006). Bowen and Hallowell (2002) contend that customer service staffs offer the first and often, the only impression of the firm and therefore are the “image makers” of the firm, representing the organization to the customer. Zeithaml and Bitner (2000) described a service staff as a link between the external customer and the internal operations of the organization. According to FAO (2012) good hygiene practices can be seen as all “practices regarding the conditions and measures necessary to ensure the safety and suitability of food at all stages of the food chain”. Mainly, the safety and hygienic conditions of these foods are the responsibilities of the food handlers who oversee the processing stages till the final consumption. One study examined service staffs’ visible sanitation practices to test customers’ expectations of service quality using four items: neatness of hair style, cleanliness of hair, condition of nails and hands, and behavior in touching the surfaces of eating utensils (Becker, Murrmann et al. 1999). A trained and skillful service staff is knowledgeable and has an ample understanding of the major five dimensions of service quality: reliability, responsiveness, empathy, assurance, and tangibles (Wilson et al., 2008) and good hygiene practices (Tsang & Ap 2007) which help to facilitate the delivery of excellent services to customers.

Customer patronage is the approval or support provided by customers with respect to a particular brand. Patronage delivers the foundation for an established and growing market share. Kotler (2007) advocates that consumers have unpredictable degree of patronage to particular services, stores and other entities. Patronage arises when an individual displays conscious effort to choose a solution towards his or her need(s) through the process of analyzing situations which would be rewarding and relatively satisfying amidst some challenges faced in the course of fulfilling his/her own desires (Adiele & Grend, 2016). This explains why individuals can exhibit unconditional attachment and affection towards objects or persons (Adiele & Etuk, 2017). Oliver (1999) suggested that patronage is a continuum, starting from some cognitive beliefs followed by affective cognitive loyalty, and finally actual purchase behaviors. Gaining customer patronage is an important objective of strategic marketing and relationship marketing initiatives (Kumar et al., 1999). Customers are more inclined to patronizing a business that goes the extra mile in marketing itself and special treatments leave a positive impact on customers and keeps them returning to the business (Ademola, 2013). Customers go through a process before buying an item. Understanding consumer behavior and the processes they go through in making a purchase decision is vital for building customer patronage.

Service staff possess abilities and capabilities that cannot be easily copied by competing firms. Delivering a satisfactory service and highly hygienic service to customers requires a complex combination of ideas and strategies that are in alignment with organizational customer-oriented, service-minded vision. When the service employees provide the accurate service that meets the customer's desires, the company gains a positive reputation, hence attaining the higher market share and charges more than its competitors for service (Wilson et al., 2008). Despite the importance attached to healthy food service delivery, cross-contamination remains a major causative factor in outbreaks of diseases and food poisoning that occurs in restaurants, take-away and fast food places (Gaibani et al., 2011; Giraudon, Cathcart, Blomqvist, Littleton, Surmanilee &

Mifsud, 2009; Insulander, DeJong, & Severi, 2012). Statistics in Nigeria reveal that about 5, 160 deaths occur yearly and have been associated with chronic disease such as systemic failure, diarrhea and cancer which are results of poor food safety culture and poor hygiene (Akinyemi, 2017.). In 2013, the World Health Organization (WHO; 2013) estimated that contaminated foods have been responsible for 1.5 billion diarrhea cases and 1.5 million mortalities annually in children. This figure was likely to increase considering the rate of proliferation of eat-at-home vendors and food restaurants who have little trainings and experiences on safety and hygienic food handling. According to Aksoydan, (2007) the restaurant cleanliness and overall hygiene seems to be one of key factors in customers' restaurant quality evaluations. Customers pay detailed attention to the dressing, health condition and general appearance of service staff before making purchase decision. As reported by Amjadi and Hussain, (2005); Walker, Pritchard, and Forsythe, (2003) neglect in maintaining high level of personal hygiene, failures and errors made in handling foodstuff are the most common mistakes made by workers in catering firms during cooking, cooling, and re-heating phases of foods. The Hygiene Practices covers proper storage of food items, maintenance of clean environment during food preparation, and assurance of all dishes served clean and free of bacteria that can potentially cause further contamination and cause food borne illness (Lee et al., 2012). Therefore, to improve or achieve reduction in the rate of food related ailment is centered on the service staff ability to acquire training and dispense professionalism when delivering service to the customers.

According to Zoonoses, (2006) improving food safety is therefore predicated on knowledge of personal hygiene, adequately cooked foods, avoidance of cross contamination, safe temperatures for stored foods, and avoidance of serving unsafe foods to consumers. Lack of food standards, poor environmental sanitation, and a lack of education on basic hygiene practices all impact the delivery of safe street foods in developing countries (Egbebi & Seidu, 2011; Hassan & Dimassi, 2014; Onwe, 2013; Williams, 2011). There are evidences relating service staff hygiene attitude and standard safety practices. Similarly, several qualitative researchers have explored the perceptions and knowledge of food handlers on food safety regulations and procedures. However, while food hygiene can be a key factor in deciding restaurant choice (Ungku & Fatimah, 2011; Worsfold, 2006) and the degree of patronage and repeat patronage, most consumers have little consideration regarding food safety before making purchase decision (Aksoydan, 2007; Leach, 2003). Customers who do consider safety often use aesthetics, visible cues, and restroom cleanliness to reflect the kitchen environment.

2.3 Service Staff Hygiene and Customer Retention

Delivering quality, in either products or services, is a significant component of the competitive strategy (Becker & Murrmann, 1999). Academic researchers have conducted many studies regarding restaurant service quality and customer satisfaction and retention; they found that the following variables contribute to restaurant customer satisfaction: food quality, human service, physical environment, cleanliness, convenient location, speedy service, and reasonable price and value (Pettijohn 1997; Qu 1997; Wall & Berry 2007; Barber & Scarcelli 2009). Wall and Berry (2007) suggested three terms: functional, mechanic and humane clues as three dimensions that transferred from restaurant service staff to the customer. A functional clue is the technical quality of the food itself and the accuracy or efficiency of the service. A mechanic clue indicates

nonhuman elements in the service environment consisting of the ambience and other design including equipment, facility layout, lighting, and color. The last clue is a humane one which covers the performance, behavior, and appearance of the employees. They identified that dining is a multilayered experience so at least these three types of clues affect a customer's evaluation of a particular establishment (Wall & Berry 2007). Oliver (1996) described customer satisfaction as a level between a positive and negative feeling, which is comfortable but not excited, and called it a level of contentment. In the service context, Parasuraman et al. (1988) believed that customer satisfaction is dependent on a specific transaction and the service offered. Specifically, each service attribute will affect the customer's emotions before, during and after the consumption experience (Oliver, 1996). The level of satisfaction will influence how customers judge the whole service quality of an organization (Bitner, 1990; Bolton & Drew, 1991). Mehrabian and Russell (1974) introduced satisfaction as a central emotion in environmental experiences, suggesting that pleasing environments encourage individuals to demonstrate approach behaviors. Since then, the impact of service environments on satisfaction has been documented by various studies (Babin & Darden, 1995; Donovan & Rossiter, 1982; Mattila & Wirtz, 2001; Mummalaneni, 2005). However, staff hygiene was found to be one of the components of an ordered environment and an increased degree of order in the service environment was found to boost customers' feelings of satisfaction (Gilboa & Rafaeli, 2003). Lucas, (2003) used the variables of customer satisfaction and overall satisfaction as mediators between the staff cleanliness and approach behaviors in a casino. He found that cleanliness was related to customers' overall satisfaction with the casino, willingness to recommend the service, intentions to revisit the site, and desire to stay in the casino.

2.4 Service Staff Hygiene and Customer Commitment

Commitment can be defined as a cognitive trust displayed by customers that the service they are purchasing is reliable and that they can depend on the service provider to act for their benefit, even under conditions in which they are vulnerable to exploitation (Bigley & Pearce, 1998; Jarvenpaa & Tractinsky, 1999; Rousseau, Sitkin, Burt, & Camerer, 1998). Commitment is vital for many business relationships, playing a crucial role in economic transactions involving risk (Gefen, Karahanna, & Straub, 2003). Haggard (2003) offers a theoretical argument stressing the importance of staff hygiene in patients' judgments regarding the degree of professionalism in hospitals. According to this author, health care services will be judged as high in quality as long as their staff and environment are clean, tidy, and welcoming, an expectation nurtured from childhood when we are taught to trust clean places and avoid dirty ones. Several empirical studies demonstrate the influence of hygiene practices and cleanliness (Wakefield & Blodgett, 1996) on perceived service quality, which in turn has been found to be related to customer commitment (Chiou, Droge & Hanvanich, 2002; Lewis & Soureli, 2006; Baker, Grewal, & Parasuraman, 1994; Reimer & Kuehn, 2005). Knowledge on the importance of hygiene practices should be given to all staffs in the food processing businesses so as to bring behavioral changes besides adopting of positive attitudes (Coleman & Roberts, 2005). But in some previous studies no differences were detected between the staff who attended an educational course with those who did not (Angelillo, Viggiani, Rizzo & Bianco, 2001). This statement was supported by several studies (Bas, Safak & Kivanic, 2006; Nee & Sani, 2011), and it indicates that although training may increase the knowledge of hygiene practices among service staffs, this does not always produce a positive change in food handling attitudes. Meanwhile, Park, Kwak and Chang (2010) also pointed out that

knowledge alone is not sufficient to promote positive attitudes and safe behaviors among the service staff. Therefore, service staff need to have a confident understanding of the basic knowledge of good hygiene practices at least, to ensure they can assess and build customer commitment.

2.5 Service Staff Hygiene and Customer Referral

A satisfied customer is a brand representative who serves as an ambassador. Often times, consumers engage in post purchase activities by dispensing information about their dining experiences which is dependent on the outcome. A health conscious service staff produces higher levels of customer satisfaction, which in turn leads to higher levels of positive consumption behaviors, such as revisiting, positive word of mouth, or recommending the restaurant to others (Chow & Lou, 2007; Conkin Merrill & Harpaval., 2000). Wall and Berry (2007) suggested three terms: functional, mechanic and humane clues as three dimensions that transferred from restaurant service staff to the customer. A functional clue is the technical quality of the food itself and the accuracy or efficiency of the service. A mechanic clue indicates nonhuman elements in the service environment consisting of the ambience and other design including equipment, facility layout, lighting, and color. The last clue is a humane one which covers the performance, behavior, and appearance of the employees. They identified that dining is a multilayered experience so at least these three types of clues affect a customer's evaluation of a particular establishment (Wall & Berry 2007). However, staff hygiene was found to be one of the components of an ordered environment and an increased degree of order in the service environment was found to boost customers' feelings of satisfaction (Gilboa & Rafaeli, 2003). Lucas, (2003) used the variables of customer satisfaction and overall satisfaction as mediators between the staff cleanliness and approach behaviors in a casino. He found that cleanliness was related to customers' overall satisfaction with the casino, willingness to recommend the service, intentions to revisit the site, and desire to stay in the casino.

Understanding of customers' expectations or perceptions of restaurant hygiene standard can be a determinant of their behavioral intention. Service quality which is an aspect of service staff hygiene has been a major area of scholarly debate and have been explored using various dimensions by different scholars in various industries. Since service quality is abstract and may not be seen or appreciated, customers' judgment is considered a valid judgment. According to Zeithaml (1988), perceived quality is the consumer's judgment about an entity's overall excellence or superiority. It is a form of attitude and results from a comparison of expectations with perceptions of performance. Parasuraman, et al. (1985) listed unique features of service such as intangibility, heterogeneity and inseparability of production and consumption which has been adopted widely in service industry as parameters in service quality evaluation. For example, Barber and Scarcelli (2009); Jang and Liu (2009); adopted appearance of customer's contact employee as determinant of service quality. Among various factors of restaurant cleanliness, service staff, especially a customer-contact employee is discussed in many studies because of the interactive nature of the service delivery (Grönroos 1984). This is because these service staff always have one-on-one encounter with customers and their hygienic condition may affect service delivery outcome. Grönroos (1984) found that customer contact with an employee's behavior can positively or negatively affect customer' perceptions of service performance. Personal hygiene failures and

errors made in handling foodstuff are the most common mistakes made by workers in catering firms during cooking (Amjadi & Hussain, 2005; Walker, Pritchard, & Forsythe, 2003) and these mistakes if not properly handled by knowledgeable management may lead to a negative word of mouth and because customers rely on customers referrals to reduced perceived risks, most restaurant users are willing to make enquiries about the hygiene staff of a restaurant staff before any visit. Referral is a form of communication which involves consumers discussing their experience after their service consumption (Casidy and Shin, 2015). It is now the most vital communication strategy to promote product and brands (López, and Sicilia, 2014). The impact of referral is particularly strong in the hospitality industry (Litvin et al., 2008; Lee & Youn, 2009) because the quality of experience in the consumption of goods such as restaurant service is often unknown before consumption. For long term relationship it is necessary to provide standard quality service to satisfy the customers Service quality will impact the clients to create word of mouth (Söderlund & Rosengren, 2008). A satisfied customer is a brand representative who serves as an ambassador. Often times, consumers engage in post purchase activities by dispensing information about their dining experiences which is dependent on the outcome through Word of Mouth (WOM). WOM can influence decisions either positively (Richins, 1983) or negatively (Bolfing, 1989). It does appear that negative WOM has a more powerful impact than positive WOM (Arndt, 1967). Hence, this study hypothesizes;

H₁: There is no significant relationship between service staff hygiene and customer retention.

H₂: There is no significant relationship between service staff hygiene and customer commitment.

H₃: There is no significant relationship between service staff hygiene and customer referral.

3. Methodology

Cross sectional survey was considered a reliable method for the study as a result of its capability to determine or measure responses from multiple differences. Questionnaire was used as instrument for data collection. All the registered restaurants all enlisted with the Association of Fast Food and Confectionary of Nigeria (AFCON) Rivers State Branch constituted the population of this study. According to Rivers State Ministry of Commerce & Industry (Yellow Pages, 2016/2017), Fifty-Two (52) registered and functional fast food restaurants are in operation in Rivers State. The population is infinite; therefore, the sample size was determined. According to Krejcie and Morgan, (1970) any population above One Hundred Thousand (100, 000) will generate a sample size of Three Hundred and Eighty Four (384) (See appendix). Therefore, Three Hundred and Eighty Four (384) is the sample size for this study (See appendix). Responses were purposefully and conveniently generated using structured copies of questionnaire in order to determine the frequency of customers to these restaurants. As stated by Bernard, (2002), Patton, (2002), Mackey, & Gass, (2005), only respondents with useful information regarding the phenomenon under investigation are qualified to respond. Based on this, seven (7) copies of the structure questionnaire were used to gather responses from customers of these registered restaurants in Port Harcourt. Three Hundred and Eighty Four (384) copies of questionnaire with

25 item questions structured using 5-point likert measurement scale were distributed, which were subsequently used for our analysis. The study employed regression analysis aided by the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 21.0 for analyses.

4. Results and Discussions

4.1 Multiple regression analysis for the relationship between the dimension of perceived food quality (service staff hygiene, food presentation menu variety food freshness/temperature and customer referral(CR) dependent variable

Variable	B	SEB	β	t	sig
SSH	-.349	.400	-.390	-3.617	.000
FP	.778	.096	.961	9.951	.001
MV	.054	.078	.070	864	.000
FFT	.235	.062	.305	6.373	.001
constant	6.845	.037		17.122	.000

Source: Author computation using SPSS version 22

H0₁: There is no significant re Service Staff Hygiene and Customer Retention

The regression result showed that service staff hygiene (SSH) has a significant impact or influence on the customer retention (CRT) of restaurants in River State. The beta weight (β) value of .134 is an indication that about 13.4 percent of the effect of customer's retention is caused by service staff hygiene, while 86. % is explained by other factors. Also, Service staff hygiene (SSH) has a significant influence on customer retention. It shows that a 1% increase in SSH would lead to approximately 13% increase in customer retention. This impact is seen to be statistically significant at the 5% level of significance, judging from the F-value of 142. which, is >19.7107. This means that there is a significant positive relationship between Service Staff Hygiene (SSH) and Customer Retention (CRT) of restaurant in Rivers State.

The result associated *p* value of the test which corresponds to service staff hygiene (SSH) at 0.000 which is less than 0.05. This finding led to the rejection of the null *hypothesis one*, implying that the relationship between service staff hygiene and customer retention of the restaurants is significant. This finding is in line with scholars like (Gaibani et al., 2011; Insulander, DeJong, & Severi, 2012). Who argued that despite the importance attached to healthy food service delivery, cross-contamination remains a major causative factor in outbreaks of diseases and food poisoning that occurs in restaurants, take-away and fast food places. Also, this study agrees with Akinyemi, (2017) provides statistics to show that in Nigeria reveal that about 5, 160 deaths occur yearly and have been associated with chronic disease such as systemic failure, diarrhea and cancer which are results of poor food safety culture and poor hygiene. In 2013, the World Health Organization (WHO; 2013) estimated that contaminated foods have been responsible for 1.5 billion diarrhea cases and 1.5 million mortalities annually in children.

Also, this study find support from the empirical study of Aksoydan, (2007) who asserted that the restaurant cleanliness and overall hygiene seems to be one of key factors in customers' restaurant quality evaluations. He further argues that customers pay detailed attention to the dressing, health condition and general appearance of service staff before making purchase decision. His position is not different from earlier scholars like (Amjadi and Hussain, 2005; Walker, Pritchard, and Forsythe, 2003) who have shown empirically that neglect in maintaining high level of personal hygiene, failures and errors made in handling foodstuff are the most common mistakes made by workers in catering firms during cooking, cooling, and re-heating phases of foods.

Lee et al., (2012) conclude that the hygiene practices covers proper storage of food items, maintenance of clean environment during food preparation, and assurance of all dishes served clean and free of bacteria that can potentially cause further contamination and cause food borne illness. They further argued that to improve or achieve reduction in the rate of food related ailments is centered on the service staff ability to acquire training and dispense professionalism when delivering service to the customers.

Our study agrees with Ungku & Fatimah, 2011; Worsfold, 2006) who argue that while, food hygiene can be a key factor in deciding restaurant choice the degree of patronage and repeat patronage, most consumers have little consideration regarding food safety before making purchase decision. Gilboa & Rafaeli, (2003) concluded that staff hygiene was found to be one of the components of an ordered environment and an increased degree of order in the service environment was found to boost customers' feelings of satisfaction. We therefore, argue that service staff hygiene significantly affects customer retention. Considering the grand mean value of 3.88, the respondents are in consensus that service staff hygiene is one of the components that would boost customers feeling of satisfaction and wiliness to revisit. This position is in line with the argument of Lucas, (2003) used the variables of customer satisfaction and overall satisfaction as mediators between the staff cleanliness and approach behaviors in a casino.

4.2 Service Staff Hygiene and Customer Commitment

The regression result showed that service staff hygiene (SSH) has a significant impact or influence on the customer commitment (CC) of restaurants in River State. The beta weight (β) value of .134 is an indication that about 13.4 percent of the effect of customer commitment is caused by service staff hygiene. It indicates that a 1% increase in SSH would lead to approximately 13% increase in customer commitment. This impact is seen to be statistically significant at the 5% level of significance, judging from the F-value of 142 which, is >19.7107 therefore, This means that there is a significant positive relationship between service staff hygiene (SSH) and customer commitment (CC) of restaurant in Rivers State. The result associated p value of the test corresponding to service staff hygiene (SSH) is 0.000 which is less than 0.05. This finding led to the rejection of the null *hypothesis two*, implying that the relationship between service staff hygiene and customer commitment of the restaurants is significant. This finding is in line with scholars (Chiou, Droge & Hanvanich, 2002; Lewis & Soureli, 2006; Baker, Grewal, & Parasuraman, 1994; Reimer & Kuehn, 2005) their research has demonstrated the influence of hygiene practices and cleanliness has on customer commitment. These studies provide evidence to support the argument that service staff hygiene does impact on the commitment level of the customers to the particular restaurant. Thus, the mean score 3.8. Commitment has widely been

acknowledged to be an integral part of any long-term business relationship (Stephens, 2000). In most cases, it is described as a lasting intention to build and maintain a long-term relationship (Orisingher, Valentini & Angelis, 2010). This study agrees with Morrisson & Huppertz, (2010) who argued that commitment is an important concept, referring to the degree to which close and persistent relationships with other parties are established and maintained. Again this study is validated by the findings of FAO (2012) who argued that good hygiene practices can be seen as all “practices regarding the conditions and measures necessary to ensure the safety and suitability of food at all stages of the food chain”. Mainly, the safety and hygienic conditions of these foods are the responsibilities of the food handlers who oversee the processing stages till the final consumption. Earlier studies like (Becker, Murrmann et al. 1999). Took similar position when they studied the relationship between service staff sanitation and customer expectation, their study revealed that customers’ expectation is for service staff to have these four quality in terms of hygiene: neatness of hair style, cleanliness of hair, condition of nails and hands, and behavior in touching the surfaces of eating utensils. We argue thus, that service staff hygiene contributes to the firm’s goal of having committed customers. This is in line with the thoughts of Ademola, (2013) who stated that customers are more inclined to patronizing a business that goes the extra mile in marketing itself and special treatments leave a positive impact on customers and keeps them returning to the business.

4.3 Service Staff Hygiene and Customer Referral

The regression result explained that service staff hygiene (SSH) has a significant impact or influence on the customer referral (CR) of restaurants in River State. The beta weight (β) value of .134 is an indication that about 13.4 percent of the effect of customer referral is caused by service staff hygiene. It shows that a 1% increase in SSH would lead to approximately 13% increase in customer referral. This impact is seen to be statistically significant at the 5% level of significance, judging from the F- value of 142 which, is >19.7107 . This means that there is a significant positive relationship between service staff hygiene (SSH) and customer referral (CR) of restaurant in Rivers State. The associated *p*- value for the corresponding test on service staff hygiene and customer referral is less than 0.05, hence we reject the third null hypothesis, implying that there exist significant and positive relationship between service staff hygiene and customer referral. This finding is in line with the finding of earlier scholars’ like (Gilboa & Rafaeli, 2003; Lucas, (2003) who found a considerably connection to staff hygiene as being one of the components of that increases of feelings of satisfaction by the customer. This supports the empirical research done by Grönroos (1984) the study found that customer contact with an employee’s behavior can positively or negatively affect customer’ perceptions of service performance meanwhile, (Amjadi & Hussain, 2005; Walker, Pritchard, & Forsythe, 2003) are examples of studies that have provided support for the essence of service staff hygiene as being instrumental to customer referral thus they argued that personal hygiene failures and errors made in handling foodstuff are the most common mistakes made by workers in catering firms during cooking and these mistakes if not properly handled by knowledgeable management may lead to a negative word of mouth and because customers rely on customers referrals to reduced perceived risks, most restaurant users are willing to make enquiries about the hygiene staff of a restaurant staff before any visit.

This study agrees with the assertion of Casidy and Shin, (2015) who argued that referral is a form of communication which involves consumers discussing their experience after their service consumption. Also, López, and Sicilia, (2014) argues that referral is now the most vital communication strategy to promote product and brands this study agrees total with this position

In summary we infer that a satisfied customer is a brand representative who serves as an ambassador. It has been established that WOM can influence decisions either positively (Richins, 1983) or negatively (Bolfing, 1989). The impact of referral is particularly strong in the hospitality industry (Litvin et al., 2008; Lee and Youn, 2009) because the quality of experience in the consumption of goods such as restaurant service is often unknown before consumption. For long term relationship it is necessary to provide standard quality service to satisfy the customers Service quality will impact the clients to create word of mouth (Söderlund and Rosengren, 2008). A satisfied customer is a brand representative who serves as an ambassador.

5.1 Conclusion

The restaurant service sector appears to pay more attention to the measures of customer patronage, this by implication translates more to being profit oriented than customer oriented. This explains the reason behind constant complaints regarding cross-contamination, outbreaks of diseases and overall poor food hygiene. Efforts geared towards maintaining a high standard of service staff hygiene affects customer commitment, customer retention and customer referral positively in the restaurant industry.

5.2 Recommendations

1. Service providers should train and retrain service staff and all representatives on globally accepted best practices regarding skills involved in preparing, arranging and decorating foods that can enhance food presentation. This is necessary because the study that food presentation was found to be most statistically significant in determining customer patronage.
2. To remain competitively positioned and relevant in the era of widespread technology advancement where customers have plethora of information at their disposal, restaurant owners and their management must be very proactive in discoveries, adopting and initiating new strategies that can improve food quality perception of customers.

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