

**PHYSICAL EVIDENCE CONSIDERATION AND CUSTOMER PATRONAGE AMONG
HYPERMARKETS IN PORT HARCOURT.****Songo Lawson****Department of Marketing, Faculty of Business Studies****Ignatius Ajuru University of Education, Rumuolumeni. Port Harcourt****ABSTRACT**

This study focused on physical evidence consideration and customer patronage among hypermarkets in Port Harcourt, specifically to ascertain the relationship between physical evidence consideration and customer patronage. The study decomposed physical evidence considerations into four dimensions, namely, exterior designs, interior designs and store layout with the measure of customers' patronage. The major conclusion derived from the study was that physical evidence influences customers' patronage. Therefore it recommended that operators of hypermarkets should ensure effective application of physical evidence consideration as depicted as well as effective technological inclusions in the business environment.

Keywords: Physical Evidence, Customer Patronage, Hyper Market

INTRODUCTION

Retail outlets deal with activities of acquiring, stocking, designing and exchanging goods and services that fulfill the customers' experience. The specific choice of activities, their structure and sequencing within processes will be guided by the store format adopted. Previous researchers have outlined the role of such activities, for instance, those related to virtual store design and atmosphere (Diamond, *et al.*, 2009), product mix (Conant *et al.*, 1993), pricing (Kocas & Bohlmann, 2008), branding (Borghini *et al.* 2009). Other researchers have shed light on less visible business activities, such as the adoption of new technology (Padgett & Mulvey, 2007) and business specific supply chain optimization (Basuroy, *et al.*, 2001). This is a pointer that physical evidence consideration has been a concern in the trend of business.

In general, a conducive shopping environment is a delight to many customers. Thus the business environment is designed to stimulate customers' patronage and emotion that influences their buying behaviour (Gowrishankar, 2017). Physical evidence is the business design created outside and within the store by physical and non physical features that communicate to arouse customers' feeling towards the store (Pradeep, 2019). The scholar further suggested that, if customers are exposed to stimuli in a positive way, it will have impact on their patronage and preferences toward the store. Pradeep (2019) stated further that the key element that distinguishes modern hypermarkets such from other hypermarkets formats is the physical evidence. The difference is the experience that is created through physical evidence consideration, which consists of exterior designs, interior designs and store layout.

The word customer or consumer patronage mean a person or thing that eats or uses something or a person who buys goods and services for personal consumption or use (Oxford English Dictionary 2008). People patronize organizations like hypermarkets at one time or the other.

Customer patronage can be described as the placing of order after order by a consumer from the same organization; it can also be seen as the buying of services by a consumer of the same brand. Repeat patronage customers are customers', who are satisfied emotionally, intellectually, physically by an organization offering which could be in form of a service which exceeds their expectations.

Customer patronage is a key concept in marketing. The concept has been described from the behavioural and attitudinal point of view. For instance, Kumar (2016) defined customer patronage behaviour as a choice behaviour of consumer which represents the preference for a particular service provider over the other in the same industry. Jere et al., (2014) defined customer patronage as the result of a consumer's assessment on one service provider being better than others based on their experience. Kumar (2016) proposed more simplified definition of patronage behaviour of consumer as the repeat purchase behaviour at a particular company for either the same products or any other products.

Based on the theory of planned behaviour, customer patronage behavior is preceded by attitudes and intentions that are formed prior to a customer's behaviour. Attitude refers to one's overall positive or negative evaluation of performing a particular behaviour. The stronger the positive attitude towards the behaviour is, the stronger the intention and likelihood of performing the behaviour (Jere et. al., 2014).

Relationship between Physical Evidence and Customer Patronage

Studies have suggested that the physical surrounding of a service firm is a key factor for selection. Ahmad, Ghazali, and Othman (2013) in their studies stated that the physical environment and quality of service of hypermarkets are the most influencing factors towards customer's behavior toward patronage and loyalty. while Sefian, Jaini, Sharudin and Abdullah (2013) found that perceived value and the quality of the hypermarkets, service, and atmosphere are the factors influencing repeat patronage. In a study carried out, Pride and Ferrell (2012) noted that customer's repeated patronage of Burger King is first as a result of high quality good and also as a result of the firm having good value and dependable service. Other studies suggested that the physical surrounding of a hypermarkets is a key factor for customer patronage.

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In a study on factors influencing customer patronage of the quick casual hypermarkets in Malaysia, Rozekhi et al. (2014) found that all service quality dimensions significantly enhanced customer's predisposition to re-patronage, but the atmospheric environment had the highest influence. Nyakweba, Wesonga, and Bosire's (2015) study on the analysis of factors influencing consumer patronage of bars in Kenya observed that the hypermarkets and bar clientage were status inclined thus to satisfy and retain customers, managers must provide for the different niches. The study identified seven factors in literature: they include brand image, quality of services offered, supportive systems, variety of services, convenience, cost of service, and social factor balance.

Deivanai, (2016) observed that for customer's preference of hypermarkets and purchase decision in India, hypermarkets product quality, internal and external environment, and price were more significant while other variables like employee co-operation, service quality, the convenience of hypermarkets and product variety were poor in their effects. Similarly, Kim, Ng, and Kim (2009) found that hypermarkets quality, atmosphere, service quality, convenience, price, and value all influences repeat patronage customers of university hypermarkets in China.

Bhagat's (2016) study on factors enhancing satisfaction and patronage in five international hypermarkets' brands in India employed product taste, healthy hypermarkets products, menu variety, availability of promotional activity, brand name, price and employee services. The study concluded that the factors for repeat patronage in Indian hypermarkets were price,

brand name, employee services, and taste. The submission of Ali, Ahmed, Nazir, Zafar, Zahid (2014) revealed that Indian hypermarkets customers who visited for family celebrations were less influenced by price than by quality environment, good security and quality employee services. It shows that customers were more concerned with an exciting and secure environment for celebrations than the high prices of the hypermarkets productd. Similarly, customers who repeated patronage for business reasons were influenced by the physical environment and quality than the price of hypermarkets products. The study further showed that contrary to this, a customer whose reason for repeated patronage was for the daily meal will often look for a low priced outlet and be ready to forfeit other quality factors. Another identified factor influencing repeat patronage is the ease and location of the hypermarkets (Njoku, Kalu & Okeke, 2015). According to Porter, (2000) location comprised of the convenience of reach' and availability of parking spaces and sitting areas in hypermarkets showing that customers would disregard hypermarkets quality and environmental quality for a conveniently located hypermarkets.

Ahmad, et al. (2013), examine physical surroundings, service quality and hypermarkets quality as the dominant factors identified by most authors as influencers of customer behavioral intention. Sefian, J aini, Sharudin and Abdullah (2013) in their study included perceived value in addition to the three identified by Ahmad, et al. (2013) while Nezakati, Kuan and Asgari (2011) proposed that product quality, customer satisfaction. and brand trust were the attributes driving customers of hypermarkets. Other identified factors affecting young customer's preference of hypermarkets brands include the brand name, reputation, cost, convenience, consistency, and quality. The study further revealed that these factors had a significant relationship with respondent's characteristics like age, gender, and income level. The results of Akbar and Alaudeen's (2012) investigation on factors influencing customer's choices of Malaysian full-scale hypermarkets showed that hypermarkets quality had the most influence.

Reichheld and Sasser (1990) as cited in Saeed, et al. (2013) report a strong relationship between customer defection rate and increased profits. According to their research, reducing the defection rate by just 5% generates between 25% and 85% more profits for the organization depending on the pertinent industry (Reichheld, 1990 as cited in Nezakati, Kuan & Asgari, 2011). Most investigations suggest that organizations should keep hold of the customers that patronize them as a competitive asset.

A study by Sefian, Jaini, Sharudin, and Abdullah (2013) carried out a study to examine factors influencing customer's intention for repeat patronage in a locally home-grown hypermarkets chain hypermarkets known as Radix Fried Chicken (RFC). The findings showed that customer's intention for repeat patronage was hinged on the hypermarkets quality and perceived value offered by RFC. Customers were highly concerned about some factors such as; health and appeal of the menu.

These studies further prove that patronage is affected by service type and the culture of service provider. Other attributes like a reasonable price and positive mood designs of the hypermarkets positively contributed to good patronage experience and depicted an indirect influence on repeat patronage.

Relationship between Architectural Design and Customer Patronage of Hypermarkets in Por Harcourt

Durocher, (2010) carried out a study on Investigation on Hypermarkets Layout Design, the findings of the study shows that layout design (architectural design) has a significant relationship with customers patronage of a hypermarkets. The study also highlighted that there are different concepts of architectural design among hypermarkets, which need to be implemented in the design of all hypermarkets. These factors can be categorized and changed

according to the different variables like: Lighting design, colour design, sound and acoustic design, heating cooling and ventilation design, material selection, exterior space design and hypermarkets layout design.

Architect and designers should choose proper colour to create pleasant atmosphere and satisfy both hypermarkets customers and owners. Before choosing the colours, designer should choose the mood that wants to express in the space. Generally, bright colours and colourful tones are mostly dedicated to the hypermarkets and quick service hypermarkets which could be recognizable and attract people from proximity, while full service hypermarkets offer more muted tones (Piotrowski, 2007).

Andaleeb and Conway, (2006) examining Interior design as a factor influencing customer satisfaction has to be considered as the inner beauty of a firm or hypermarkets. Research conducted by Liu and Jang, (2009) found out that interior design and atmospherics directly affect customer satisfaction. The influence of a hypermarkets' interior design and atmospherics on customer satisfaction is mediated by physical evidence, emotions and perceived value.

Relationship between Physical Evidence Consideration and Customer Patronage Based on Hypermarkets Safety Environment among Hypermarkets in Port Harcourt

Study conducted by Sylvester (2013) The results from the Owerri hypermarkets managers' survey provide a snapshot of hypermarkets safety knowledge and practice in Rivers State. From all perspectives, the results indicated that there was great need for education of hypermarket service personnel in Rivers State on how to prevent hypermarkets-borne illnesses among hypermarkets. The survey found that most respondents knew the circumstances that may lead to hypermarkets-borne illness among hypermarkets and the importance of hand washing. About two-thirds of the respondents understood the dangers of cross-contamination but almost half of the managers indicated that allowing a sick person to prepare or serve hypermarkets could not cause people to get hypermarkets-borne illness among hypermarkets. That appeared to be one of the danger zones.

Sylvester et al. (2013) carried out an Assessment of Hypermarkets Safety Needs of Hypermarkets in Imo State, Rivers State. In their survey, was found that hand washing was not practiced by the hypermarkets employees all the time. Only about 70% actually washed their hands all the time. The negative consequences of not washing hands with soap all the time prior to cooking or serving customers in hypermarkets could not be underestimated. Although 82% of the respondents indicate that they normally rinsed or washed their hands after cracking open raw eggs, only 40% and 60% of class C and D hypermarkets, respectively washed hands after handling open raw eggs before they resumed cooking or served customers in hypermarkets .

Santos et al (2015) examined the impact of practice of hypermarkets hygiene on safe hypermarkets production in Portuguese hypermarkets. An interviewer administered questionnaire that collected data on socio-demographic characteristics, knowledge of hypermarkets hygiene, self-reported behaviours towards safe hypermarkets handling, and personal health and hygiene was administered to 124 hypermarkets handlers from 32 hypermarkets. Chi-square analysis was carried out to find out the association among the variables. The study found a significant association between hypermarkets sanitation, hypermarkets hygiene and practice of hypermarkets safety in Portuguese hypermarkets.

CONCLUSIONS

The findings of the study were based on the results from the quantitative analyses of the data which was in line with the aim of the study. The major conclusion was derived from how

operators of hypermarkets and other relevant stakeholders perceived Physical evidence considerations and its relationship with customers' patronage.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the implications of the study outcomes, the following recommendations are made:

- 1) Operators of hypermarkets should ensure proper exterior designs such as landscaping, window designs, store entrance and aesthetic design of the environment such that it will be appealing to the customers that will enhance patronage by ways of positive patronage.
- 2) Managers of hypermarkets should ensure effective interior design, décor, color, signage and proper merchandising. In the same vein, the operators of hypermarkets should ensure effective lighting and background music on the hypermarkets floor for memorable shopping experience. There should be friendliness among employees and those that patronize them.
- 3) Operators of hypermarkets should ensure effective technological inclusions in the
- 4) business environment to ensure proper checks(To what effect?) in the business place.

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