

ASSESSMENT OF CUSTOMER SERVICE AND CUSTOMERS' REPEAT PATRONAGE IN FOOD RESTAURANTS IN LOKOJA METROPOLIS, KOGI STATE: EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE

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Abstract

The study focused on assessment of Customer Service and Customer repeat patronage in food restaurants in Lokoja metropolis, Kogi State: Empirical evidence. The specific objectives were to examine the relationship between empathy, responsiveness and complaint handling on customer repeat patronage in food restaurants in Lokoja metropolis, Kogi State, Nigeria. Data were gathered from primary source; The population of the study consisted of customers of selected food restaurants. To facilitate data collection purposive sampling method was used to select 120 participants from the three purposively selected popular restaurants in Lokoja metropolis, Kogi State. Pearson correlation statistical tool was used to test the hypothesis. The findings revealed that empathy, responsiveness and complaint handling have significant relationship with customer repeat patronage in food restaurants. The study recommends that: Restaurant owners should place great emphasis on empathy to influence customer repeat patronage; they should give assurance towards responsiveness to enhance customer repeat patronage and restaurant owners should be tactical in handling customers complaint to influence their customer repeat patronage in the competitive business environment.

Keywords: Customer service, Repeat patronage, Empathy, Responsiveness, Complaint handling

Introduction

Customer service is a main factor in achieving business success, particularly in the sectors of hospitality and food service. The significance of exceptional customer service is paramount, as it has a direct impact on customer satisfaction, which subsequently leads to loyalty and repeat business (Adamu & Onishowo, 2025; Njelita *et al.*, 2020). Here, customer service encompasses the various services given to patrons before, during, and after their dining experience, such as personal interactions, service efficiency, and meeting customer needs effectively. High-quality customer service can greatly influence customer satisfaction, which in turn drives repeat patronage, which is a vital element for the longevity and expansion of food establishments in Lokoja (Ogah *et al.*, 2024;

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Omo-Diagi & Garcia-Medina, 2020). Repeat patronage serves as an indicator of customer satisfaction and is also a key motivator for revenue, profitability, and brand loyalty (Sulaimon & Ojo, 2022). This loyalty is essential for business progress, particularly for food outlets, since retaining customers is often less expensive than acquiring new ones (Alao *et al.*, 2020; Adamu & Onishowo, 2025).

The food service industry, especially restaurants, is vital for the economic advancement of any society. In Nigeria, food establishments have increasingly served as centers for social gatherings and job creation, particularly in urban areas like Lokoja, Kogi State (Adebayo & Akinmoladun, 2021; Njelita *et al.*, 2020). As Nigeria's economy shifts towards a service-oriented model, consumer satisfaction in the food service sector now hinges not only on food quality but also on customer experience. This shift is primarily due to the rising awareness among consumers regarding their rights and expectations in service and the competitive landscape of the restaurant industry in cities (Adebayo & Akinmoladun, 2021; Omo-Diagi & Garcia-Medina, 2020). Moreover, enhanced service delivery has been associated with greater customer retention and favorable word-of-mouth advertising, both crucial for business viability (Ogah *et al.*, 2024; Adamu & Onishowo, 2025).

Nonetheless, even with the expansion of the food service industry in Lokoja, issues regarding inconsistent customer service and its effects on repeat patronage have arisen. The standard of customer service in food establishments throughout Nigeria varies greatly, with this inconsistency often attributed to ineffective management, lack of staff training, and poor mechanisms for gathering customer feedback (Ojo & Olowoyo, 2020; Alao *et al.*, 2020). Consequently, many food establishments in Lokoja struggle with customer retention and achieving long-term economic success (Njelita *et al.*, 2020; Ogah *et al.*, 2024). Inadequate service can lead to customer dissatisfaction, negative feedback, and switching behaviors, all of which ultimately influence business profitability and growth (Omo-Diagi & Garcia-Medina, 2020; Adamu & Onishowo, 2025). This study seeking to understand how customer service influences repeat patronage in restaurants in Lokoja.

Statement of the Problem

The food service sector in Nigeria, particularly in Lokoja, has experienced significant expansion recently, fueled by an expanding middle class, rising urbanization, and evolving consumer lifestyle choices. The level of customer contentment in this sector is closely associated with both the standard of food and the caliber of service provided (Adeyemi & Adebayo, 2020). However, many dining

establishments in Lokoja find it challenging to maintain customer loyalty because of inconsistent or subpar service quality. The investigation regarding the evaluation of customer service and the frequency of customer return visits in Lokoja's food restaurants aims to address this issue and contribute to economic growth in Nigeria.

In Lokoja, numerous food establishments encounter obstacles such as a shortage of qualified staff, poor management practices, and a failure to adjust to evolving customer expectations. As a result, many patrons do not revisit these restaurants, which negatively impacts their long-term viability (Kaba & Ogundele, 2021). Moreover, even though many restaurant proprietors recognize the significance of customer service, there remains a lack of understanding regarding the specific aspects of service that affect customer loyalty and the likelihood of return visits.

Research conducted by Akanbi and Akinmoladun (2021) indicates that the quality of customer service in Nigerian dining establishments is directly connected to customer retention. While earlier research has examined customer satisfaction and loyalty in larger cities, there is limited empirical evidence using service quality dimensions such as empathy, responsiveness, complaint handling that focus on smaller urban areas such as Lokoja. Thus, this study is necessary, as it seeks to bridge the research gap by analyzing the influence of customer service on repeat patronage in food establishments within Lokoja, Kogi State.

Objectives of the study

The primary objective of this study is to assess the role of customer service in influencing customers' repeat patronage in food restaurants in Lokoja metropolis, Kogi State. Specifically, the study aims to:

- i) evaluate the relationship between empathy, and customer repeat patronage in food restaurants in Lokoja metropolis, Kogi State, Nigeria.
- ii) examine the relationship between responsiveness and customer repeat patronage in food restaurants in Lokoja metropolis, Kogi State, Nigeria.
- iii) determine the relationship between complaint handling and customer repeat patronage in food restaurants in Lokoja metropolis, Kogi State, Nigeria.

Nature of Customer Service

Customer service is the help and support that business offer to customers before, during, and after they buy something. It includes all the ways a business interacts with customers to make sure

they are happy and have a good experience. In today's business world, customer service is seen as an important tool that helps companies build strong relationships and stay ahead of their competition. Good customer service makes sure that customers' needs, expectations, and worries are handled in a timely and professional way (Johnston & Kong, 2020). Customer service is focused on the customer. This means that companies need to create service processes that are designed to meet and go beyond what customers expect. Businesses that put customers first are more likely to have satisfied and loyal customers. According to Edvardsson *et al.* (2021), customer service is not just about fixing problems, it is also about adding value through meaningful interactions that make the customer experience better. This shows that the relationship between businesses and customers is changing from short-term to long-term and more personal. Service quality is an important part of customer service. Service quality is about how well a service matches what the customer expects (Parasuraman *et al.*, 2021). When customers feel the service, they get is good or better than what they expected, they are more likely to have a positive view of the company and keep using its services (Kotler & Keller, 2021). Service quality is often measured by several factors like reliability, responsiveness, empathy, assurance, and tangibles, which together shape how customers feel about the service they receive (Parasuraman *et al.*, 2021). In recent years, technology has changed how customer service works. Many companies now use digital tools like live chat, mobile apps, and social media to talk to customers and offer quick help. These tools let businesses respond to customer questions faster and improve service delivery, which helps customers feel better about their experience (Lemon & Verhoef, 2022). Even though technology helps a lot, human interaction is still very important because customers often want to speak with someone who understands them and shows concern. Customer service also needs to keep improving and adapting to changing customer needs. Today's customers are more informed and have higher expectations. Because of this, companies must regularly check how well their service is working and find ways to improve it. Studies say that businesses that invest in training employees, getting feedback from customers, and coming up with new service ideas are better at delivering great customer service and building lasting relationships (Hadi, 2024).

Empathy and customer service

Empathy is a key part of good customer service and helps shape how customers feel during their interactions. In customer service, empathy means that service providers understand customers

feelings, views, and needs and show real care during service. It involves treating customers with respect, paying attention to their problems, and offering solutions that match their specific needs. Empathy creates a positive emotional connection between customers and service providers, which can greatly influence customer satisfaction and loyalty (Edvardsson *et al.*, 2021). Empathy is one of the main factors in service quality. Service quality models say that customers judge the service experience not just by the result but also by how the service is given. When employees care about customers and help them in a thoughtful way, customers feel more valued and respected (Parasuraman *et al.*, 2021). This emotional connection makes the service experience better and improves how customers see the company. In customer service, empathy is shown through actions like listening carefully, being patient, understanding, and communicating in a personal way. Employees who show empathy are better at finding out what customers need and responding in the right way. According to Johnston and Kong (2020), when service employees show empathy, customers see the company as more caring and responsive, which leads to better service experiences and more trust. Empathy is also important when things go wrong. If a service fails, customers might feel upset or frustrated. Showing empathy during these moments helps reduce negative feelings and makes customers feel confident again. Research shows that customers who get empathetic responses when they complain are more likely to forgive mistakes and continue doing business with the company (Lemon & Verhoef, 2022). This shows that empathy matters not just in normal service interactions but also during difficult situations where customers expect understanding and support. Empathy also helps build long-term customer relationships and loyalty. Companies that encourage employees to show empathy in their interactions are more likely to create meaningful experiences that make customers feel valued. According to Hadi (2024), businesses that focus on empathetic engagement tend to keep customers longer and get them to return more often. Customers are more willing to keep using a company if they feel treated with real concern and respect. In today's customer service world, where technology and automated systems are used a lot, empathy is more important than ever. Although technology can improve service efficiency, customers still value personal understanding and emotional connections. Therefore, companies must balance the use of technology with personal, empathetic interactions to deliver better customer experiences (Kotler & Keller, 2021).

Responsiveness and customer service

Responsiveness is a key part of customer service that shows how willing and able service providers are to help customers quickly and efficiently. It means giving timely answers to customer questions, requests, and complaints and making sure they get the support they need without unnecessary delays. In service management, responsiveness is seen as an important part of service quality because customers often judge organizations based on how quickly and well they respond to their needs (Parasuraman *et al.*, 2021). In customer service, responsiveness means employees are ready to help and provide services in a timely way. Customers today expect organizations to act fast, especially with the fast pace and use of technology. When service providers respond quickly, customers see the organization as reliable and customer-focused. This positive image helps with customer satisfaction and overall experience (Kotler & Keller, 2021). Responsiveness also shapes how customers see service quality. According to Edvardsson *et al.* (2021), customers look at service quality not just based on the final result but also how well service providers respond to their requests. When employees are willing to help and solve problems quickly, customers feel valued and respected. This improves relationships between customers and service providers and builds trust in the organization. Responsiveness helps satisfy customers by reducing waiting times and quickly solving issues. Most customers prefer businesses that offer immediate help if they have problems with their products or services. Slow responses or not paying enough attention to customer needs can lead to frustration and dissatisfaction. Therefore, organizations must design customer service systems that respond quickly and effectively to customer concerns (Johnston & Kong, 2020). Also, responsiveness is linked to customer loyalty and repeat business. When customers get prompt and efficient service, they are more likely to value the organization and keep using its products or services. Studies show that timely customer interaction improves retention and long-term relationships (Hadi, 2024). Responsive organizations are more likely to build loyal customer bases and gain a competitive edge. Technological advancements have changed how responsiveness works in customer service. Companies often use digital tools like email, live chat, social media, and apps to respond quickly. These tools allow businesses to communicate with customers in real time and provide faster solutions. However, even with the benefits of technology, organizations must make sure responsiveness includes personalized communication and effective problem-solving to improve satisfaction (Lemon

& Verhoef, 2022). In conclusion, responsiveness is a vital part of customer service that affects service quality, satisfaction, and loyalty. By responding quickly to customer needs and solving problems on time, organizations can create positive service experiences and strong customer relationships. Businesses that focus on responsiveness in their strategies are better positioned to keep customers and achieve long-term success.

Complaint handling and customer service

Complaint handling is a key part of good customer service and important for keeping customer satisfaction and loyalty. Complaints happen when there is a difference between what customers expect and what they actually receive. Complaint handling is the process through which organizations receive, investigate, and resolve complaints in a fair and timely way. Good complaint management helps businesses fix service failures, regain customer trust, and improve service delivery (Johnston & Kong, 2020). In customer service, complaints are not just about being unhappy. They are also a way for customers to give feedback that can help organizations find areas to improve. When customers share their complaints, they give businesses the chance to understand their expectations and better their service.

According to Edvardsson *et al.* (2021), companies that treat complaints as learning opportunities can improve service performance and strengthen customer relationships. Effective complaint handling includes steps like acknowledging the complaint, listening to the customer, investigating the problem, offering a solution, and following up. These steps show the organization is committed to solving problems and keeping good relations. When customers feel their complaints are taken seriously and handled well, they are more likely to trust the company and keep doing business with it (Kotler & Keller, 2021).

Empathy and communication are also key parts of handling complaints. Service staff must be understanding and patient when dealing with unhappy customers. By actively listening and showing concern, employees can reduce frustration and create a better recovery experience. Research shows that showing empathy during complaint resolution improves customer satisfaction and makes the process feel fair (Lemon & Verhoef, 2022).

Good complaint handling is also important for service recovery. Service recovery is when organizations fix service failures and bring customers back to satisfaction. When companies respond

quickly and fairly to complaints, they can turn unhappy customers into loyal ones. Studies show that customers who have successful service recoveries develop stronger loyalty than those who never had problems (Hadi, 2024). Another important part of complaint handling is responsiveness. Customers expect companies to address their complaints quickly and well. Delays can lead to more dissatisfaction and bad word of mouth. So, organizations must set up efficient systems for handling complaints so service staff can respond fast and effectively (Parasuraman *et al.*, 2021). In today's business environment, digital tools have changed how complaints are handled. However, organizations must make sure these systems are supported by skilled customer service representatives who can provide personalized help when needed (Lemon & Verhoef, 2022).

Customer Repeat Patronage

Customer repeat patronage refers to the tendency of customers to continue purchasing products or services from the same organization over a period of time. It is regarded as a vital measure of customer loyalty and the long-term sustainability of a business. In the context of customer service, repeat patronage occurs when customers consistently return to a business because they are satisfied with the assistance they receive. Organizations that deliver high-quality customer service are more likely to retain customers and motivate them to make repeat purchases (Kotler & Keller, 2021).

Customer service plays a significant role in influencing repeat patronage, as it shapes customer experiences and perceptions of the organization. When customers receive timely assistance, personalized attention, and effective solutions to their issues, they are more inclined to develop positive attitudes toward the business. These positive experiences encourage customers to continue patronizing the organization and to recommend its services to others (Lemon & Verhoef, 2022).

One crucial element linking customer service to repeat patronage is customer satisfaction. Customer satisfaction occurs when the service provided meets or exceeds customer expectations. Satisfied customers are more likely to trust the organization and maintain long-term relationships with the business. According to Edvardsson *et al.* (2021), organizations that consistently deliver satisfactory service experiences tend to achieve higher levels of customer retention and repeat purchasing behavior.

Service quality dimensions such as responsiveness, empathy, and effective complaint handling also play a significant role in promoting customer repeat patronage. Responsiveness ensures that

customer inquiries and complaints are addressed promptly, while empathy allows service employees to understand and respond to customers' emotional needs. Effective complaint handling helps organizations resolve service failures and restore customer confidence. When these service quality dimensions are properly implemented, customers are more likely to remain loyal and continue using the organization's products or services (Parasuraman *et al.*, 2021).

Moreover, repeat patronage is beneficial for organizations because retaining existing customers is often more cost-effective than acquiring new ones. Loyal customers tend to purchase more frequently, spend more money, and engage in positive word-of-mouth communication, which can attract additional customers. As a result, businesses that focus on improving customer service can enhance customer retention and strengthen their competitive position in the marketplace (Johnston & Kong, 2020). In addition, technological advancements have impacted customer repeat patronage by enhancing service accessibility and communication. Many organizations now provide customer support through digital platforms such as mobile applications, websites, and social media channels. These platforms allow businesses to interact with customers quickly and efficiently, thereby improving customer satisfaction and encouraging repeat purchases (Lemon & Verhoef, 2022).

Research also indicates that timely engagement and consistent communication with customers significantly increase their likelihood of returning to a business. When customers feel valued and appreciated by the organization, they are more inclined to maintain long-term relationships with the company. Therefore, organizations must invest in customer service strategies that prioritize customer satisfaction, trust, and relationship building (Hadi, 2024).

Expectation–Confirmation Theory (ECT)

Expectation-Confirmation Theory (ECT) was originally developed by Oliver (1980) and has been widely applied in recent customer satisfaction studies. The focal point of this theory is the comparison between customers' pre-purchase expectations and the actual performance of the service experienced after consumption. The theory assumes that customers form expectations before purchasing a service, and after experiencing the service they evaluate whether those expectations have been confirmed or disconfirmed. When service performance meets or exceeds expectations, customers experience satisfaction, which increases the likelihood of repeat patronage (Oliver, 2020). However, the theory has been criticized for focusing primarily on cognitive evaluation of service

performance while giving less attention to emotional and relational aspects of customer experience (Lemon & Verhoef, 2022). Despite this limitation, the major strength of the theory lies in its ability to explain how customer satisfaction is formed and how it influences customers' intention to continue purchasing from the same organization. In relation to customer service, organizations that consistently meet or exceed customer expectations through quality service delivery are more likely to encourage repeat patronage and long-term customer relationships (Kotler & Keller, 2021)

SERVQUAL Theory

SERVQUAL Theory, developed by Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry (1988). The focal point of this theory is the measurement of service quality using five key dimensions: reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy, and tangibles. The main assumption of the SERVQUAL model is that customers evaluate service quality by comparing their expectations of service with the actual service they receive. When the perceived service performance matches or exceeds expectations across these dimensions, customers perceive the service as high quality (Parasuraman *et al.*, 2021). One criticism of the SERVQUAL theory is that it may not fully capture differences in service expectations across industries or cultural contexts. Some scholars argue that the model may need adaptation depending on the nature of the service environment (Edvardsson *et al.*, 2021). Nevertheless, the strength of the SERVQUAL model lies in its practical application in evaluating and improving customer service quality. In relation to customer repeat patronage, organizations that perform well across SERVQUAL dimensions are more likely to enhance customer satisfaction and encourage customers to return for future purchases.

Relationship Marketing Theory

Relationship Marketing Theory, popularized by Berry (1983) and further developed in modern marketing literature, focuses on building long-term relationships between organizations and customers rather than concentrating only on single transactions. The focal point of this theory is the establishment, development, and maintenance of mutually beneficial relationships between service providers and customers. The theory assumes that organizations that focus on relationship building through trust, communication, and personalized service will achieve higher levels of customer loyalty (Kotler & Keller, 2021). However, critics argue that maintaining long-term relationships with customers may require significant resources and continuous effort from organizations, which may not

always be feasible for all businesses (Johnston & Kong, 2020). Despite this criticism, the major strength of the theory lies in its emphasis on customer retention rather than customer acquisition. In relation to customer service, organizations that maintain strong relationships with customers through effective communication, empathy, and responsiveness are more likely to achieve repeat patronage and long-term loyalty (Hadi, 2024).

Empirical Review

Hadi (2024) conducted a study on “From Responsivity to Retention: The Role of Timely Engagement in Customer Loyalty.” The main objective of the study was to examine how responsiveness in customer service influences customer retention and repeat patronage. The study adopted a quantitative research design using survey questionnaires administered to customers of service organizations. Data were analyzed using statistical techniques such as regression analysis to determine the relationship between responsiveness and customer loyalty. The findings revealed that responsiveness significantly improves customer satisfaction and increases customers’ willingness to continue patronizing a company’s services (Hadi, 2024). The study concluded that prompt responses to customer inquiries and complaints enhance customer trust and encourage repeat purchases. The study recommended that organizations should invest in efficient customer support systems and employee training programs to improve responsiveness and maintain long-term relationships with customers.

Edvardsson, Tronvoll, and Gruber (2021) conducted a study on “Understanding Value Co-Creation in Service Encounters.” The objective of the study was to investigate how customer service interactions influence customer satisfaction and long-term customer relationships. The researchers adopted a mixed research design, combining qualitative interviews with quantitative survey analysis to examine customer experiences in service organizations. The findings showed that positive service interactions between employees and customers significantly enhance perceived value and customer satisfaction, which in turn increases the likelihood of repeat patronage (Edvardsson *et al.*, 2021). The study concluded that organizations that focus on delivering personalized and high-quality customer service experiences are more likely to retain customers. It recommended that businesses should prioritize employee training and customer engagement strategies to strengthen service interactions and improve customer loyalty.

Lemon and Verhoef (2022) conducted a study on “Understanding Customer Experience Throughout the Customer Journey.” The objective of this study was to examine how customer service experiences across different stages of the customer journey influence customer satisfaction and repurchase intentions. The study adopted a conceptual and empirical research design using data collected from various service industries including retail, telecommunications, and banking. The findings indicated that consistent and positive customer service experiences across all customer touchpoints significantly influence customer satisfaction and repeat patronage (Lemon & Verhoef, 2022). The study concluded that customer service plays a critical role in shaping the overall customer experience and determining whether customers will continue patronizing a company. The authors recommended that organizations should adopt integrated customer service strategies that ensure consistent service delivery across all communication channels.

Johnston and Kong (2020) conducted a study on “Improving Customer Experience Through Service Management.” The objective of the study was to examine how service quality management influences customer satisfaction and repeat purchasing behavior. The study employed a survey research design, collecting data from customers in hospitality and retail service sectors. Statistical analysis was used to determine the relationship between service quality dimensions and customer loyalty. The findings revealed that service quality elements such as responsiveness, empathy, and effective complaint handling significantly influence customers’ intentions to revisit or repurchase services (Johnston & Kong, 2020). The study concluded that organizations that provide efficient and reliable customer service are more likely to achieve customer retention and repeat patronage. The study recommended that businesses should implement service quality monitoring systems and continuously improve customer service processes to enhance customer satisfaction and loyalty.

Overall, these empirical studies provide strong evidence that customer service plays a significant role in influencing customer repeat patronage. Effective customer service practices such as responsiveness, personalized service interactions, and consistent customer experience management contribute to higher levels of customer satisfaction and loyalty. Organizations that prioritize customer service improvement are therefore more likely to retain customers and achieve sustainable business success (Kotler & Keller, 2021).

Methodology

The study adopted descriptive survey research design, which is appropriate for examining the relationship between customer service practices and repeat patronage in the restaurant industry. A descriptive design enables researchers to collect detailed information from respondents and analyze patterns of behavior, perceptions, and experiences (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). Primary data was collected using structured questionnaires with both closed-ended and Likert-scale items to assess customer service dimensions using responsiveness, empathy, Complaint handling and Customers' repeat patronage. The study population consists of customers of food restaurants in Lokoja Metropolis, Kogi State. The study employs a sample size of 120 respondents from the three selected popular food restaurant using purposive sampling to ensure participants are active restaurant customers with experience interacting with customer service personnel. Purposive sampling is suitable when the study requires respondents with specific characteristics, such as knowledge of customer service processes or repeated patronage patterns (Johnston & Kong, 2020). Content validity was utilized by aligning questionnaire items with established service quality and loyalty measures. Reliability was established through a pilot study conducted with 15 respondents, and the Cronbach's alpha coefficient was calculated to assess internal consistency. the Cronbach's alpha coefficient show that empathy was 0.85, responsiveness was 0.89, complaint handling was 0.81, customers' repeat patronage was 0.80 respectively. A reliability coefficient of 0.70 or higher was considered acceptable for the study (Parasuraman *et al.*, 2021). Pearson correlation was used to test the relationship between customer service.

Data Analyses and interpretation

H01: Empathy has no significant relationship with Customers' repeat patronage in food restaurants in Lokoja metropolis, Kogi State, Nigeria.

H02: Responsiveness has no significant relationship with Customers' repeat patronage in food restaurants in Lokoja metropolis, Kogi State, Nigeria.

H03: Complaint handling has no significant relationship with Customers' repeat patronage in food restaurants in Lokoja metropolis, Kogi State, Nigeria.

Correlations

		Customer Repeat Patronage	Empathy	Responsiveness	Complain Handling
Repeat Patronage	Pearson Correlation	1	.921**	.702**	.883**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000	.000	.000
	N	120	120	120	120
Empathy	Pearson Correlation	.921**	1	.700**	.810**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000		.000	.000
	N	120	120	120	120
Responsiveness	Pearson Correlation	.702**	.700**	1	.816**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000		.000
	N	120	120	120	120
Complaint Handling	Pearson Correlation	.883**	.810**	.816**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000	
	N	120	120	120	120

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

Decision Rule

A Pearson product-moment correlation was run to determine the relationship between empathy, responsiveness, complaint handling and customers' repeat patronage in food restaurants in Lokoja metropolis, Kogi State, Nigeria. Customer service has significant relationship with customers' repeat patronage in food restaurants in Lokoja metropolis, Kogi State, Nigeria ($r = 0.921$, $n = 120$, $p = .000 < 0.05$). Responsiveness has significant relationship with customers' repeat patronage in food restaurants in Lokoja metropolis, Kogi State, Nigeria ($r = 0.702$, $n = 120$, $p = .000 < 0.05$). Complaint handling has significant relationship with Customers' repeat patronage in food restaurants in Lokoja metropolis, Kogi State, Nigeria ($r = .883$, $n = 120$, $p = .000 < 0.05$). Therefore, Empathy, responsiveness, complaint handling have significant relationship with Customers' repeat patronage in food restaurants in Lokoja metropolis, Kogi State, Nigeria.

Discussion of Findings

Hypothesis one revealed that empathy has significant relationship with customers' repeat patronage in food restaurants in Lokoja metropolis, Kogi State, Nigeria ($r = 0.921$, $n = 120$, $p = .000 < 0.05$). The finding is in line with Al-Hawary and Al-Syasneh, (2020) stated that empathy is a fundamental aspect of customer service because it enables service providers to recognize and respond to customers' emotions and personal needs, thereby creating meaningful and positive service

experiences; when employees demonstrate genuine understanding and concern, customers feel valued and listened to, which significantly enhances their satisfaction with the service encounter.

Hypothesis two revealed that responsiveness has significant relationship with customers' repeat patronage in food restaurants in Lokoja metropolis, Kogi State, Nigeria ($r = 0.702$, $n = 120$, $p = .000 < 0.05$). The finding is in line with Rodriguez-Diaz *et al.*, (2022) stated that responsiveness strengthens customer relationships and loyalty by reducing waiting time and ensuring that issues are resolved in a timely manner, as prompt engagement has been shown to significantly improve customer satisfaction and foster long-term commitment, making it an essential driver of repeat patronage and positive service outcomes.

Hypothesis three revealed that complain handling has significant relationship with Customers' repeat patronage in food restaurants in Lokoja metropolis, Kogi State, Nigeria ($r = .883$, $n = 120$, $p = .000 < 0.05$). The finding is in line with Kim, Kim and Heo (2021) stated that efficient complaint handling contributes significantly to customer loyalty and long-term relationship building, as customers who experience satisfactory resolution of their issues are more likely to continue patronizing the business and even develop stronger commitment than those who did not encounter problems, making it a critical driver of customer retention and positive word-of-mouth

Conclusion

The study findings showed that empathy, responsiveness, complain handling have significant relationship with Customers' repeat patronage in food restaurants in Lokoja metropolis, Kogi State, Nigeria.

Customer service is not just about fixing problems; it is also about adding value through meaningful interactions that make the customer experience better. This shows that the relationship between businesses and customers is changing from short-term to long-term and more personal. Service quality is an important part of customer service. Service quality is about how well a service matches what the customer expects. Customer service also needs to keep improving and adapting to changing customer needs.

Recommendations

The study attracts the following recommendations based on the findings;

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- i) Restaurant owners should place great emphasis on empathy to influence customer repeat patronage.
- ii) They should give assurance towards responsiveness to enhance customer repeat patronage.
- iii) Restaurant owners should be tactical in handling customers complaint to influence their customer repeat patronage in the competitive business environment.
- iv) They should embrace a unique customer service strategies to enhance customer repeat patronage. Customer service is considered a strategic tool that helps organizations build strong relationships with customers and maintain a competitive advantage in the marketplace.

Limitations

The study limits its conceptual and geographical scope to assessment of customer service and customers' repeat patronage in food restaurants in Lokoja metropolis, Kogi State: Empirical evidence due to financial and time constraints experienced by the researcher.

Suggestions for further studies

The study can be suggested for further study by expanding it beyond Lokoja metropolis, Kogi State, and extending the study to other geographical areas in Nigeria for further assessment, gaps, and findings that may enhance the study.

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