

# INTERPERSONAL JUSTICE AND CUSTOMER BEHAVIOUR OF BEVERAGE MANUFACTURING FIRMS IN PORT HARCOURT, NIGERIA

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## ABSTRACT

*This study examined the relationship between interpersonal justice and customer behaviour of beverage firms in Port Harcourt. The study adopted a cross-sectional survey in its investigation of the variables. Primary data was generated through self-administered questionnaire. The population of this study consists of seventeen (17) registered beverage firms in Port Harcourt. However, four (4) marketing managers, five (5) Advertisement managers and two (2) senior and junior manager were drawn from each of these firms to serve as the test units. A total of Two hundred and Twenty-one (221) respondents participated in the study. The reliability of the instrument was achieved by the use of the Cronbach Alpha coefficient with all the items scoring above 0.70. The hypotheses were tested using the Spearman's Rank Order Correlation Coefficient with the aid of Statistical Package for Social Sciences version 22.0. The tests were carried out at a 95% confidence interval and a 0.05 level of significance. The result indicated that there is a significant relationship between interpersonal justice and customer behaviour of beverage firms in Port Harcourt. The study concluded that there is a relationship between interpersonal justice and customer behaviour and therefore recommends that management should put in place easily accessible avenues through which customer can voice their complaints, like using customer care centres, suggestion boxes and 24 hour automated services regarding*

*frequently asked questions instead of leaving subscribers to complain privately to their social groups.*

Keywords: Interpersonal Justice, Customer Behaviour, Repeat Purchase, Word of Mouth

## INTRODUCTION

Upholding a mutually beneficial association between service providers and customers is imperative to ensuring customer satisfaction and sustainable profits. While many service organizations make prodigious efforts to ensure that customers are satisfied, service failure is almost inescapable given the unique features of heterogeneity, inseparability and intangibility associated with services (Kotler & Keller, 2012). Service failure consists of any glitches observed or experienced during a customer's interaction with the provider. Common service failures include inaccessibility, poor delivery, unpredictable outcomes as well as any occurrences where a service fails to satisfy customer expectations (Maxham, 2001). The negative feelings associated with service failure lead to dissatisfaction and the likelihood of poor relations with the customer, increased complaints and undesirable word-of-mouth (WOM) communication against the service provider (Kau & Loh, 2006). To avoid negative consequences, companies make efforts to design effective recovery strategies to restore satisfaction. Interpersonal justice, a dimension of interactional justice is one of the approaches adopted to rectify service failure. It focuses on customers' concerns regarding the quality of treatment they receive when the failure is being rectified. The interactional justice emanates from the recognition of propensity of customers to complain when they experience service failure. This stems from a perception of unfairness associated with inequity in the relationship between the customer and service provider. As such the customer expects the company to provide a solution to recover the situation or to compensate for the imbalance. However, to obtain this recompense the customer must invest in time and effort (Chebat & Slusarczyk, 2005). Correcting an imbalance creates a feeling of consistency with customer beliefs and expectations leading to satisfaction. In the context of service failure and recovery, justice perception signifies the manifestation of fairness during the recovery process subsequent to a disappointing initial service (Tan, 2014). It is based on the individual customer's consideration of the service recovery experience. For instance, a customer who experiences a service failure such as a delay in receiving validation for a money transfer for electricity bill payment will feel distressed and may call the service

provider to pursue correction of the problem.

Service failure is viewed as an injustice based on the disparity in the relationship between the customer and the service provider (Chebat & Slusarczyk, 2005). The perceived imbalance in the exchange is based on customer's investment in time, money and effort when compared to the service provider's failure to deliver what was expected or promised. Additionally, the evaluation of fairness may also be prejudiced by the knowledge of how other customers were treated in similar situations. Interactional justice is significant in the execution of service recovery since a perceived lack of fairness may impact on customer satisfaction as well as loyalty and intention to recommend (Smith et al., 1999; Nibkin et al., 2010). Respect and courtesy are key aspects; an apology for the failure is also considered particularly important when executing a service recovery strategy (Hess et al., 2003; Davidow, 2003). Although interactional justice incorporates both interpersonal justice and informational justice, this study focuses on the interpersonal justice component; thus, the study examines the relationship between interpersonal justice and customer behaviour of beverage firms in Port Harcourt, Nigeria. In view of this, an attempt was made to address the following research questions:

- 1) What is the relationship between interpersonal justice and repeat purchase by customers of beverages firms in Rivers State?
- 2) What is the relationship between interpersonal justice and word of mouth by customers of beverages firms in Rivers State?

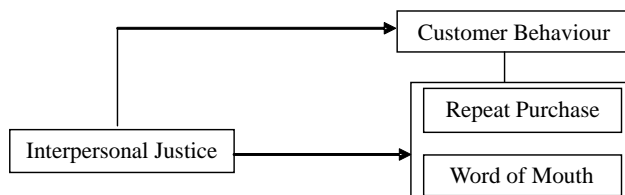


Figure1: Conceptual Framework for the relationship between interpersonal justice and customer behaviour

Source: Author's Desk Research, 2020

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Theoretical Foundation

Equity theory suggests that people seek fairness in exchange relationships (Adams, 1965). Customers expect justice from service providers in the management of service failure and base their evaluation at least partly on the nature of interactions. Customer satisfaction with service recovery is associated with the quality of interactions with frontline personnel during the correction process (Ellyawati et al, 2012). The performance of a transaction by a service provider is perceived to meet, exceed or fall below customer expectations resulting in satisfaction, delight or dissatisfaction respectively. Dissatisfied customers expect the service provider to engage in a recovery process to correct the service failure and restore satisfaction. A recovery creates a new service loop with a new evaluation process (Oliver, 1980).

Customer perception of interactional fairness and its implications for satisfaction has been the subject of scholarly research and practitioner's debate over the years. In a study on the contribution of brand evangelism to recovery satisfaction (Rashid & Ahmad, 2014) acknowledged the impact of customer justice perceptions in the formation of evaluative judgment on service situations involving conflict. The concept of fairness based on social psychology is considered suitable for examining individual responses to service encounters involving failure and recovery (Ellyawati et al, 2012). The significance of interactional justice evaluation in the recovery satisfaction judgement is associated with the interpretation that a customer suffers a deficit or harm following service failure (Oliver, 1980; Weun et al., 2004) and may therefore seek redress through service recovery with a view to obtaining restoration.

Previous studies have reported a connection between fairness perception and satisfaction in a number of diverse settings including hotels, restaurants, airlines and retail (Blodgett et al., 1997; Spark & McColl-Kennedy, 2000; Nibkin, et al., 2010; Ellyawati et al., 2012). Several researchers have found that interactional issues in the handling of complaints have implications for customer satisfaction as well as post recovery behavior (Kau & Loh, 2006; Tan, 2014). Interactional justice interprets customers' perception of fairness of the behavioral element during recovery process. The manner in which the customer is treated by the frontline staff during the service recovery process affects recovery satisfaction (Tan, 2014).

## Concept of Interpersonal Justice

Interpersonal justice reflects the degree to which people are treated with politeness, dignity, and respect by authorities and third parties involved in executing procedures or determining outcomes. Interpersonal justice is particularly important in shaping employee behavior (Greenberg & Alge, 1998; Judge, Scott, & Ilies, 2006; Neuman & Baron, 1997; Robinson & Greenberg, 1999; Skarlicki & Folger, 2004). Interpersonal justice captures the degree to which people are treated properly, with dignity, politeness, and respect (Colquitt, 2001). Day-to-day, interpersonal encounters are so frequent in organizations that interpersonal justice often becomes more relevant and psychologically meaningful to employees compared to other types of justice information (Bies, 2005; Fassina, Jones, & Uggerslev, 2008).

Interpersonal justice regards the quality of personal treatment, respect and sensitivity (Greenberg, 1990). Honesty, respect and politeness generally increase interpersonal justice perceptions (Colquitt et al. 2001). According to Bies (2001), the concerns regarding interpersonal treatment include everyday encounters, not just the ones in formal decision making contexts. Thus, a wide number of treatments such as deception, invasion of privacy, derogatory judgments and disrespect, may fall into the scope of interpersonal justice (Roch & Shanock, 2006). An assessment of interactional justice includes the attitude of the service organization's frontline personnel with reference to the politeness, courtesy and consideration with which they handle interactions with the customers during the recovery process. Negative consequences such as spreading negative word-of-mouth communications, increasing complaints and switching to competitors have been associated with perceived injustice in service recovery. Smith et al's (1999) model for assessing encounters involving failure and recovery based on perceived justice showed that service recovery influenced customer satisfaction indirectly through the perceived justice of the nature of interactions and the final outcome. Blodgett et al., (1997) proposed that interactional justice is demonstrated by honesty, clear explanation, thoughtfulness, empathy, attentiveness, and sincerity.

## Concept of Customer Behaviour

The term "customer" is typically used to refer to one who regularly purchase from a particular store or company. The "consumer" more generally refers to anyone engaging in any of the activities (evaluating, acquiring, using or disposing of goods and services) used in the definition of consumer behaviour.

Therefore, a “customer” is defined in terms of specific firm while consumer is not. Customers are value maximizers within the bounds of search costs, limited knowledge, mobility and income. The most commonly thought of consumer situation is that of an individual making a purchase with little or no influence of others. A consumer is one who determines personal wants, buys products and uses those products. The traditional viewpoint defines consumers strictly in terms of economic goods and services or one who consumes goods. Consumer behaviour involves the understanding that acquisition, use and disposition can occur over time in a dynamic sequence. In other words the study of consumer behaviour is the study of how individuals make decisions to spend their available resources (money, time, efforts) on consumption-related items.

The American Marketing Association (AMA) defines consumer behaviour as “the dynamic interaction of cognition, behaviour and environmental events by which human beings conduct the exchange aspect of their lives”. Consumer behaviour is “the study of individuals, groups, or organisations and the processes they use to select, secure, use and dispose of products, services, experiences, or ideas to satisfy needs and the impacts that these processes have on the consumer and society.” Behaviour occurs either for the individual, or in the context of a group (e.g., friend's influence what kinds of clothes a person wears) or an organisation (people on the job make decisions as to which services the firm should use). This study assessed customer behaviour through repeat purchase and word-of-mouth.

### Repeat purchase

A Repeat Purchase is the buying of a product by a consumer of the same brand name previously bought on another occasion. A repeat purchase is often a measure of loyalty to a brand by consumers and is often taken into account by marketing research professionals to evaluate a business. Financial returns depend on increases in market share and repeat-purchase (which is known to increase (decrease) as a brand's market share increases (decreases) (Ehrenberg et al., 1990, Ehrenberg, 1988), or increases in the degree of insensitivity customers have towards competing offers (Sharp, 1998). In this paper we concentrate on assessing the former, we do not deny that some loyalty programmes may be initiated in order to increase differentiation loyalty, raising barriers to entry for new brands and allowing firms to benefit through mechanisms such as price rises. However, in the market that we investigate marketing attention is far more concerned with market share changes, and in this very frequent repeat-purchase

market, it is doubtful that an increase in differentiation loyalty could occur without an accompanying increase change in repeat-purchase.

### Word-of-mouth

Word-of-Mouth (WOM) denotes informal communication among consumers about products and services (Liu, 2006). It is regarded as a powerful influence on consumer behavior (Anderson, 1998; Mahajan, et al. 1984), and enhanced through the rapid growth of Web 2.0 and social media (Utz, et al. 2011). With the popularity of online WOM activities, an increasing number of companies is offering online review services across various industries such as movies (Fattach, 2001), online retailing (Dellarocas, 2006), and television networks (Duan, et al. 2008). Litvin et al. (2008) suggest that WOM is particularly important for experience goods like hotels. Hotel product offerings are intangible and cannot be evaluated before consumption, which makes interpersonal influence more important. The consumption of hotel products is also seen as high risk, so consumers tend to rely on the evaluation of a reference group to reduce this (Sparks & Browning, 2011).

Word of Mouth communications can be described as a customer-dominated marketing communication whereby the communicator is not part of the product or service provider. Its nature dictates that potential customers see it positively and is perceived to be credible, trusted than the business generated communications (Schiffman & Kanuk, 2005; Arndt, 2007). The effectiveness of word of mouth communication is based on its source, that is a person known to the potential house owner and or is someone who is well trusted by the potential client of the contractor. Recommendations from such sources are more authentic and believable to people who are looking for it, than polished statements from advertising and sales promotion which is tailor made by the construction firm. Word of mouth communication is influential on customer's behaviour especially on their information search stage, evaluation of alternative solutions, and even on buying decisions (Gilly & Graham, 2008; Silverman, 2001). Word of Mouth talks give details about the service quality expectations, expenses to be incurred and the message detail will depend on the understanding of the one asking, especially in the construction sector where the service is experienced after purchase and product evaluation comes after a complete project i.e. Post purchase behaviour of the purchase decision is crucial (Cox, 2003). The Word of Mouth phenomena has attracted great attention in most business sectors as well as in the academic area.



Word-of-Mouth has been frequently studied in academic interest for many years. It has been referred to as one of the most powerful forces in business (Arndt, 1967; Buttle, 1998; Oetting & Jacob, 2010). Soderlund and Rosengren (2007) mentioned in their research that it frequently assumes on the conceptual grounds that WOM passage have an impact on the profits of the firm which was responsible for the creation of the transmitting customer's satisfaction level. Buttle (2008) defined WOM communications generally which play a major influence on what people feel (consumer attitudes) and do (behavioral intention) (Chatterjee, 2001; Sachse & Mangold, 2011; Smith & Vogt, 1995; Weinberger & Dillon, 2000). Interpersonal communications have long been recognized as an influential factor in the tourism industry. Recent research in the tourism field has demonstrated the influences of both positive and negative WOM upon tourism products crossed over a broad range of nations (Litvin, Goldsmith, & Pan, 2008). In addition, Beside, Bone (2002) proposed that WOM occur during product consumption since individuals in this situation are simply sharing thoughts, where Anderson (2008) implied that the valence of WOM can be positive, neutral, or negative. It is a frequently postulated in the literature that WOM is more powerful than formal advertising that marketing and advertising agencies shove at consumers (Bansal & Voyer, 2000; Tucker, 2011). Beside, Paridon, Carraher, and Carraher (2006) states WOM information is one kind of information sharing. Buttle (2008) study characterized WOM to five components; valence WOM can be either positive or negative. Positive WOM occurs when good news testimonials and endorsements desired by the company are uttered (These may be based on personal experience, exposure to the third party communication or to mediated communication). A consumer-driven world-the sheer volume of information available today has dramatically altered the balance of power between companies and consumers. As consumers have become overloaded, they have become increasingly sceptical about traditional company-driven advertising and marketing and increasingly prefer to make purchasing decisions largely independent of what companies tell them about products. This tectonic power shift toward consumers reflects the way people now make purchasing decisions. Once consumers make a decision to buy a product, they start with an initial consideration set of brands formed through product experience, recommendations, or awareness-building marketing (Court, Elzinger, Mulder & Jorgen, 2009).

## Interpersonal Justice and Customer Behaviour

Customer perception of interactional fairness and its implications for



satisfaction has been the subject of scholarly research and practitioner's debate over the years. In a study on the contribution of brand evangelism to recovery satisfaction Rashid and Ahmad (2014) acknowledged the impact of customer justice perceptions in the formation of evaluative judgment on service situations involving conflict. The concept of fairness based on social psychology is considered suitable for examining individual responses to service encounters involving failure and recovery (Ellyawati, Purwanto & Dharmmesta, 2012). The significance of interactional justice evaluation in the recovery satisfaction judgement is associated with the interpretation that a customer suffers a deficit or harm following service failure (Weun, Beatty and Jones, 2004) and may therefore seek redress through service recovery with a view to obtaining restoration.

Previous studies have reported a connection between fairness perception and satisfaction in a number of diverse settings including hotels, restaurants, airlines and retail (Blodgett, Hill & Tax, 1997; Nibkin, Ishmail, Mairimuthu & Jalakamali, 2010). Several researchers have found that interactional issues in the handling of complaints have implications for customer satisfaction as well as post recovery behavior (Kau & Loh, 2006; Tan, 2014). Interactional justice interprets customers' perception of fairness of the behavioral element during recovery process. The manner in which the customer is treated by the frontline staff during the service recovery process affects recovery satisfaction (Tan, 2014). An assessment of interactional justice includes the attitude of the service organization's frontline personnel with reference to the politeness, courtesy and consideration with which they handle interactions with the customers during the recovery process. Negative consequences such as spreading negative word-of-mouth communications, increasing complaints and switching to competitors have been associated with perceived injustice in service recovery. Smith, Bolton and Wagner (1999) proposed a model for assessing encounters involving failure and recovery based on perceived justice. The study showed that service recovery influenced customer satisfaction indirectly through the perceived justice of the nature of interactions and the final outcome. Blodgett et al., (1997) proposed that interactional justice is demonstrated by honesty, clear explanation, thoughtfulness, empathy, attentiveness, and sincerity.

In a study of service recovery in restaurants in the United States Namkung and Jang (2009) found that interactional justice played an important role in satisfaction and customer retention. Similar findings were reported by Collie,

Sparks and Graham (2000) in a study on the hospitality industry where they concluded that perceived interactional justice impacted the level of recovery satisfaction. It has been noted that while promptness of recovery may enhance satisfaction by signifying that the service provider cares for the customer's time, too speedy a delivery might deny employees the chance to send the necessary interactional cues which are key to perception of interactional justice (Chebat & Slusarczyk, 2005). Affiliation cues such as a smile and attentiveness from the contact personnel can augment interactional justice perception and impact recovery satisfaction (Davidow, 2003). From the foregoing point of view, we hereby hypothesized thus:

Ho1: There is no significant relationship between interpersonal justice and repeat purchase of beverages firms in Rivers State.

Ho2: There is no significant between interpersonal justice and word of mouth beverages firms in Rivers State.

## METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a cross-sectional survey in its investigation of the variables. Primary data was generated through self-administered questionnaire. The population of this study consists of seventeen (17) registered beverages firms in Port Harcourt. However, four (4) marketing managers and five (5) Advertisement managers and two (2) senior and junior manager was drawn from each of these firms to serve as the test units. A total of Two hundred and Twenty-one (221) respondents participated in the study. The reliability of the instrument was achieved by the use of the Cronbach Alpha coefficient with all the items scoring above 0.70. The hypotheses were tested using the Spearman's Rank Order Correlation Coefficient with the aid of Statistical Package for Social Sciences version 22.0. The tests were carried out at a 95% confidence interval and a 0.05 level of significance.

## DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Table 1 below shows the result of correlation matrix obtained for interpersonal justice and the measures of customer behaviour. Also displayed in the table is the statistical test of significance (p - value), which makes us able to answer our research question and generalize our findings to the study population.

**Table 1: Interpersonal Justice and customer behaviour**

			Interpersonal justice	Repeat Purchase	Word-of-Mouth
Spearman's rho	Interpersonal justice	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.851**	.923**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.000	.000
		N	162	162	162
	Repeat Purchase	Correlation Coefficient	.851**	1.000	.842**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.	.000
		N	162	162	162
	Word-of-Mouth	Correlation Coefficient	.923**	.842**	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.
		N	162	162	162
		N	162	162	162

Source: Research Data 2020, (SPSS output version 22.0)

Table 1 presents the test results for the three previously postulated bivariate hypothetical statements as follows:

HO<sub>1</sub>: There is no significant relationship between interpersonal justice and repeat purchase of beverages firms in Rivers State.

The correlation coefficient (r) shows that there is a significant relationship between interpersonal justice and repeat purchase. The rho value 0.851 indicates this relationship and it is significant at  $p 0.000 < 0.05$ . The correlation coefficient represents a strong correlation between the variables. Therefore, based on empirical findings the null hypothesis earlier stated is hereby rejected and the alternate held. Thus, there is a significant relationship between interpersonal justice and repeat purchase of beverages firms in Rivers State.

HO<sub>2</sub>: There is no significant between interpersonal justice and word of mouth beverages firms in Rivers State.

The correlation coefficient (r) shows that there is a significant relationship between interpersonal justice and word of mouth. The rho value 0.923 indicates this relationship and it is significant at  $p 0.000 < 0.05$ . The correlation coefficient

represents a strong correlation between the variables. Therefore, based on empirical findings the null hypothesis earlier stated is hereby rejected and the alternate held. Thus, there is a significant relationship between interpersonal justice and word of mouth of beverages firms in Rivers State.

## DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The test of hypotheses depicts that a strong and positive relationship exist between interpersonal Justice and each of the measures of customer behaviour in the sample of beverages firms in Rivers State. This is consistent with findings from a similar study by Chenevert and Trembly (2009) who found that good employee relations have a positive effect on performance. Customer perception of interactional fairness and its implications for satisfaction has been the subject of scholarly research and practitioner's debate over the years. In a study on the contribution of brand evangelism to recovery satisfaction Rashid and Ahmad (2014) acknowledged the impact of customer justice perceptions in the formation of evaluative judgment on service situations involving conflict. The concept of fairness based on social psychology is considered suitable for examining individual responses to service encounters involving failure and recovery (Ellyawati, Purwanto & Dharmmesta, 2012). The significance of interactional justice evaluation in the recovery satisfaction judgement is associated with the interpretation that a customer suffers a deficit or harm following service failure (Weun, Beatty and Jones, 2004) and may therefore seek redress through service recovery with a view to obtaining restoration. Previous studies have reported a connection between fairness perception and satisfaction in a number of diverse settings including hotels, restaurants, airlines and retail (Blodgett, Hill & Tax, 1997; Nibkin, Ishmail, Mairimuthu & Jalakamali, 2010). Several researchers have found that interactional issues in the handling of complaints have implications for customer satisfaction as well as post recovery behavior (Kau & Loh, 2006; Tan, 2014). Interactional justice interprets customers' perception of fairness of the behavioral element during recovery process. The manner in which the customer is treated by the frontline staff during the service recovery process affects recovery satisfaction (Tan, 2014). An assessment of interactional justice includes the attitude of the service organization's frontline personnel with reference to the politeness, courtesy and consideration with which they handle interactions with the customers during the recovery process. Negative consequences such as spreading negative word-of-mouth communications, increasing complaints and switching to competitors have been associated with perceived injustice in service recovery.

In a study of service recovery in restaurants in the United States Namkung and Jang (2009) found that interactional justice played an important role in satisfaction and customer retention. Similar findings were reported by Collie, Sparks and Graham (2000) in a study on the hospitality industry where they concluded that perceived interactional justice impacted the level of recovery satisfaction. It has been noted that while promptness of recovery may enhance satisfaction by signifying that the service provider cares for the customer's time, too speedy a delivery might deny employees the chance to send the necessary interactional cues which are key to perception of interactional justice (Chebat & Slusarczyk, 2005). Affiliation cues such as a smile and attentiveness from the contact personnel can augment interactional justice perception and impact recovery satisfaction (Davidow, 2003).

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Although a service failure has the potential to destroy customers' loyalty, the successful implementation of service recovery strategies such as interpersonal justice may prevent the defection of customers who experience a service failure (Osarenkhoe & Komunda, 2013). The study thus concludes that interpersonal justice significantly influences customer behaviour in beverage firms in Port Harcourt.

The study recommends that management should put in place easily accessible avenues through which customer can voice their complaints, like using customer care centres, suggestion boxes and 24 hour automated services regarding frequently asked questions instead of leaving subscribers to complain privately to their social groups.

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