

# EFFECT OF FRONTLINE FUNCTIONALITY ON CUSTOMER PATRONAGE OF FOUR STAR HOTELS IN PORT HARCOURT RIVERS STATE; NIGERIA.

NWADIGOHA, Emmanuel Ephraim

Department of Marketing

Michael Okpara University of Agriculture, Umudike, Abia State

Email: [emmanuelephraim35@yahoo.com](mailto:emmanuelephraim35@yahoo.com)

and

AHAIWE, Emmanuel Onyedikachi

Department of Marketing Michael Okpara University of Agriculture,

Umudike, Abia State

Email: [trustedemma@yahoo.com](mailto:trustedemma@yahoo.com)

## ABSTRACT

*The study focused on the effect of Frontline Functionality on Customer Patronage of four star Hotels in Port Harcourt. Survey research design was adopted for the study and 145 respondents were judgmentally sampled for the study. The study revealed that job knowledge, interactive and engagement skills have significant positive effects on customer patronage. This implies that enhancing the capacity of the frontline officers through training can significantly increase customer patronage, market share and boost consumers' confidence on the services provided by four star hotels. The study concluded that firms in the hospitality industry should continuously improve on the staff knowledge of their jobs and the services they render so as to improve on customer patronage. Interpersonal skill is vital for improved customer patronage, and therefore employees should be sent on training and development seminars that will help in building their interactive skills. Frontline officers*

*should also be proactive at every stage of service negotiation and strive to engage the senses of the customers, as this will lead to continuous customer patronage*

Keywords: Frontline Functionality, Customer Patronage, Four Star Hotel

## INTRODUCTION

Kotler and Armstrong (2013), stated that the service industry is on geometric progression in growth both in developed and developing countries of the world. The economic value of services as against tangible goods has also caused growth in most part of the world for over twenty-five years. (Oliver, Pennington, Revelle, Rantz, 2014). In the opinion of Vergo and Lusch, (2008), there are factors that are responsible for this paradigm shift from goods to service based businesses. In Asiegbu, Igwe, and Akekue-Alex (2013), they opined that some of those factors are: globalization, increasing competitive markets, market dynamics, privatization, changing government regulations, technological innovations and the quest for firms to add value to their service provision.

The hotel industry these days has been recognized as a global industry, with producers and customers spread around the world. The use of hotel facilities such as: room, restaurant, bar, club; is no longer considered a luxury. For many customers, these services have become an integral component of lifestyle. Moreover, in the last decade, demand for and supply of hotel services beyond that of the traditional services intended for travelers have escalated the growth of the hotel industry globally, leading to increase competition in the marketplace (Samaan & Abdullah, 2016). They went on to say that hotels that attempt to improve their market share by discounting price, however, run the serious risk of having a negative impact on the hotel's medium and long term profitability. As a result, it is quality of service rather than price that has become the key to a hotel's ability to differentiate itself from its competitors and to gain customer loyalty.

The hospitality industry in Nigeria, like its counterparts in some parts of the world, can no longer look up to its accommodation sector to service the economic down-turn. Tourists and investors' arrival into Nigeria that significantly rises hotel income from dropped 1.6 million in 2010 to 71500 in 2013 (Wesgro, 2013). This has challenged managers to look inwards for their market and hence survival. Jayakanth and Adalarau, (2016), opined that most travellers would consider the following hotel attributes when making a hotel

choice decision: cleanliness, location, room rate, security, service quality and reputation of the hotel or chain. This is given that, most customer in the hospitality industry like the hotel are in a strong bargaining position due to the significant growth of hotels (Nduka, Okocha, & Nnamchi, 2017). This keen competition has made the task of the employee (front line staff), on how to attract and retain customers' loyalty very important, as it is necessary for them to identify the attributes of the hotel characteristics that are most important to the customers (Amue, Adiele & Nkoro, 2013).

It can also be said that most frontline employees of four star Hotels in Port Harcourt lack the requisite interactive skills needed to relate with customers. The worst is that some are resistant to changing knowledge and/or skill requirements or processes, including opportunities for skill enhancement. When these are lacking in them, it becomes hard for them to interact cordially with customers and exceed their expectations of quality and timeliness standards. Other shortfalls in skills which are often lacking among most four star Hotels frontline employees include their lack of ability to communicate with customers in clear, effective, timely, concise and organized manner; lack of clarity of expression orally or in writing, and their inconsistency in keeping customers adequately informed.

This study therefore is an attempt to examine the effect of frontline staff functionalities on customer patronage of four star Hotels in Port Harcourt, Rivers State. The repositioning of the hotels could be possible through the front line staff activities in the area of interactive skills and job knowledge.

## Conceptual Framework

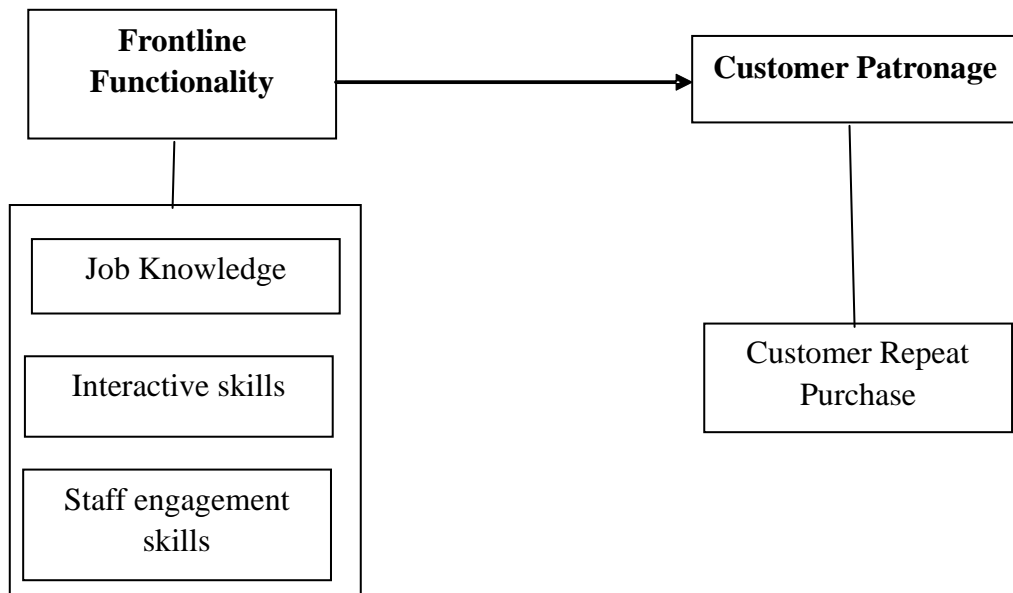


Figure 1: Operational Conceptual framework

Source: Researcher's Desk, 2018

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Theoretical Foundation

SERVQUAL model propounded by Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry, T. (1985)

The SERVQUAL model was developed by Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry (1985) to identify five different gaps between customers' expectation and service that is provided by a company. Customer expectations mean desires and hopes they have prior to the service and perceptions mean evaluation of the service that have been provided. If expectations are greater than the actual performance, then customer dissatisfaction occurs. On a contrary, the smaller these gaps, the better service quality is. The model measures five gaps that enable to analyze the service quality from the customer perspective (Strong, 2014).

### Conceptual Review

#### Understanding Frontline Functionality

The term Frontline Functionality is used in many service organizations just for administrative purposes including hotels. The department (frontline) could also bear other names like: telephones, reservation of rooms, registration, lobby deals with first contact with customers' right from the moment of reservation of rooms, registration, till the point of departure (Mackenzie and Chain, 2009). In the opinion of Kasavana (2009), the frontline officer is the nerve center of the whole hotel administration. Every impression on the guest about the hotel is made at the frontline office as it is the first and last point of contact, customer service representatives are the quintessential front line greeter and handshakes at the core of every business (Kukoyi & Iwuagwu, 2015).

Kasavana, (2009), opined that the office of the frontline staff is the most visible and essential focal point of a hotel, regardless of the class or type of hotel. He went on to say that, it is the first and last place (check-in-check-out) wherein a guest interacts with the hotel. In the opinion of Heldrebrand (2016), the frontline desk is the heart of any hotel organization or any service industry. The un-seen head or managers are always seen in the front desk staff. Mishra and Pal (2013), state that, the duties performed by a frontline staff are very important to the organization in terms of customer services.

### Job Knowledge

Some authors have defined job knowledge as technical information, facts and procedures required to do the job. (Hunter, 1993; Schmidt, Hunter, and Outerbridge, 1986). Job knowledge has a stronger effect on job performance in military samples than civilian samples. (Schmidt et al; 1986). Job knowledge is the demonstration of thorough understanding of how to perform regular work assignments relate to other areas. Job knowledge has been identified as technical information, facts and procedures required to do the job. (Hunter, 1993; Schmidt, Hunter and Outerbridge, 1986).

Job Knowledge and Skills Demonstrates exceptional understanding of the job, including processes to be followed, materials and equipment to be used has mastery of the technical skills required to perform this job. Rarely requires assistance in performing the job and demonstrates good job knowledge and understanding, required to do all aspects of job (Glosbe, 2017). Job knowledge leads to better work decisions. Job knowledge is a type of knowledge in the latest techniques, skills, and methods pertinent to the assigned area of responsibility. The staff uses and demonstrates the skills and tools necessary to perform job

effectively. He/she can draw upon previous experience to handle new problems or challenges. Make efforts to stay current in field, can identify and analyses problems and present solutions. Employees who do not have a clear understanding of how their jobs fit into the overall work picture of their organization are more likely to exhibit carelessness and the inability to make clear distinctions on which aspects of their job are most important.

### Interactive Skills

Interpersonal skills are the skills used by a person to interact with others properly. In the business domain, the term refers to an employee's ability to get along with others while getting the job done. Interpersonal skills include everything from communication and listening skills to attitude and deportment. Good interpersonal skills are a prerequisite for many positions in an organization (Investopedia, 2017). The term "interpersonal skills" is of a misnomer because it refers to character traits possessed by an individual rather than skills one can learn in a classroom. Within an organization, employees with good interpersonal skills are likely more productive than those with poor interpersonal skills because of their propensity to project a positive attitude and look for solutions to problems.

### Engagement Skill in the Service Sector

Customer engagement is a business communication connection between an external stakeholder (consumer) and an organization (company or brand) through various channels of correspondence. This connection can be a reaction/interaction effect or overall customer experience, which takes place online and offline (Dave, 2007; Eisenberg & Eisenberg, 2016). The term can also be used to define customer-to-customer correspondence regarding a communication, product, service or brand. However, the latter dissemination originates from a business-to-consumer interaction resonated at a subconscious level. Marketing practices aim to create, stimulate or influence customer behaviour, which places conversions into a more strategic context and is premised on the understanding that a focus on maximising conversions can, in some circumstances, decrease the likelihood of repeat conversions (Hollebeek, 2011; Vohra & Bhardwaj, 2016). Engagement is a holistic characterization of a consumer's behaviour, encompassing a host of sub-aspects of behaviour such as loyalty, satisfaction, involvement, Word of Mouth advertising, complaining and lot more. Customer engagement is about encouraging your customers to interact and share in the experiences you create for them as a business and a brand. When

executed well, a strong customer engagement strategy will foster brand growth and loyalty.

### Customer Patronage

Concise Oxford English Dictionary (2008) as quoted in Adiele, *et al* (2015), 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. People patronize organizations products/services at one time or the other. Patronage is burn out of a desire to be committed to an organization either based on its service quality or perceived service qualities ( Adiel, *et al*, 2015). Customer patronage is the means of a respondent being loyal to a firm's products or services. In the context of this study, we may use customer patronage and loyalty interchangeably because customer patronage precedes loyalty.

Also, their service quality and delivery strategies should be improved while looking for new avenues to regularly attract and retain their customers. The importance or essence of repeat customer patronage is that an increase in sales volume will ultimately and significantly impact on the company's profitability level (Adiele, *et al.*, 2015). Patronage is the degree which a customer exhibits repeat behavior from a service provider, possesses a positive, long lasting attitude and disposition towards a service provided. Customer satisfaction is the starting point to define business objectives. (Gandolfo & Guzzo,2014). Shim and Kotsiopulous (2013), see patronage as the deeply held intention of customer to stay with an organization and the commitment to increase the breadth and depth in relation with the firm. Simons (2016), opine that customer patronage is achieved when the anticipations of customer are fulfilled. Excellent customer service does not only make customers patronize the products but they also spread positive word-of-mouth to other people, which is an avenue for creating profit for hotels. Nowadays, one of the biggest challenges for managers in the hotel industry is to provide and sustain customer patronage as quest relationships are strategic assets of the organization (Gandolfo & Guzzo, 2014).

### Empirical Review

#### Job Knowledge and Customer Patronage

Front line officer is where a guest gains their first important information and impression (Barker & Riley, 1994). Vallen and Vallen (2009); state that, the front line office handles a bundle of duties and services for the guest. Given how

important the duties are, the front line officer exercise accurate expertise over the job; he/she must have good knowledge of his or her duties in order to give good impression of the hotel to the guest. Customers always look forward to receiving the five dimensions of service such as: reliability, tangibility, responsibility, assurance, and empathy (Gandolfo & Guzzo, 2014). Kasavana (2009), opine that the front line officer is responsible for carrying out all the front-house-duties and serve as a liaison between the management and the guests. Kukoyi and Iwuagwu (2015), opine that the front line staff must be one who is highly motivated, trained, and competent individual, one who utilizes a special mix of skills, one who can handle the hotel job description.

The primary job of a front line staff is to greet the guest, when they arrive, give them a warm welcome, make them feel as if they are at home and be refreshed (Henderson, 2009). So good job knowledge of the front line staff is very important. According to the report of US bureau of labour statistics in 2009, the report says that, a front desk staff also performs a variety of clerical tasks. Traval and Leisure (2010), opine that a good knowledge of the job would help them in understanding different personality of guests which in turn will help them plan their strategies to deal effectively with different guests in all of their job function.

### Interactive Skills and Customer Patronage

The increasing sophistication of customers' demands coupled with the increasing market competition has posed a new challenge to hotel managers, therefore, marketing scholars emphasize the influence of relationship marketing as a strategically important tool from which customer loyalty can be secured and, as a result, the attainment of higher competitiveness. (Al-Msallam & Alhaddad, 2016).

Kasavana (2009), states that front line staff is the first to interact with the guests when they come in, take information concerning them till they are finally checked in. Good interaction between guest and employee leads to great impact on customer's patronage (Rezaee, 2010). Bojei (2010), opines that interaction with customer influences customer patronage. In the study of Heidarzadeh, (2006), he states that there is a positive and significant relationship between employee interactions with guest. The first interaction occurs between the front line staff and the guest or other persons seeking hotel services or information while most managers in four star hotels will probably agree that communication with guest and among personnel is important.



The front desk staff interacts with all department of the hotel, including marketing, and sales housekeeping, food and beverage, banquet, controller, maintenance, security, and human resources. These departments view the front line staff as an interactive liaison in providing guest services. The communication skill, data analysis of front desk job is central to the success of a hotel business. Rutherford (1985) opines that in order to avoid or minimize the service delivery problems, four star hotels should consider communication skill to be an important criterion in considering candidates for the position of front desk staff since it can lead to less or more customer patronage.

Kandampully and Shartanto (2000) worked on customer loyalty in the hotel Industry: The role of customer satisfaction and image. The findings show that hotel image and customer satisfaction with the performance of housekeeping, reception, food and beverage, and price are positively correlated to customer loyalty. Koernig (2003), states that, Frontline functionality plays a very crucial role in determining customers' responses and reactions to hedonic services. Given this, the understanding of how customers perceive their service environment or scape is very important (Ryu & Han, 2010). In the work of Danija (2008), "Guest Satisfaction and Guest Loyalty for study hotel industry". He concluded that hotel service design element influence positively on guest satisfaction and consequently on quest loyalty and that the influence is weak if the service standards do not match the quality expected.

In the work by Abdhamied (2011), on customers' perception of floating restaurants in Egypt, the results indicate that aspects such as parking space, healthy, and local dishes, along with rest-room cleanliness are pivotal attributed to create satisfied customers and to increase repeat patronage intention. Daunt and Harris (2012), researched on Motives of dysfunctional customer behavior: An empirical study. The work examined the associations between factors (personality and demographic variables), and the motive that drive episodes of dysfunctional customer behavior. The findings show that there is significant differences were revealed across the personality, servicescape and situation specific variables for each motive. Cambra-Fierro (2014), worked on The Role of frontline employees in customer engagement. He found that the actions of employees (frontline staff) could suffice to generate customer engagement, even though satisfaction reinforces the effect. Consequently, it makes sense to promote positive attitudes among these employees.

In Adiele, Miebaka & Ezirim (2015), they investigated on the front desk functionality and customer patronage and the result shows poor customer patronage is predicted on the banks' in-ability to effectively adopt front line functionality. Not so much a work has been done on the area of customer patronage and frontline functionality as it applies to four star hotels. Al-msallam (2015) worked on customer satisfaction and Brand loyalty in the hotel Industry. The result shows that customer satisfaction significantly affects customer loyalty. Al-msallam, S (2015), Customer satisfaction and brand loyalty in the hotel industry. They suggested that managers should consider price fairness as foundations to build up customer satisfaction, brand loyalty and, also to improve brand image as an added on value for customers.

Finally, impact of hotel service quality on loyalty of customers by Edmunda and Dalia (2016), the result of the research revealed that the conformity of expected quality with the quality expected has a significant influence on the customer's loyalty. Some academic works have been done in the area of customer patronage, in Ryu and Han, (2010), the result shows that physical attractiveness and service encounter influence pleasure and satisfaction. Taegoo et al (2015), worked on frontline service employee's emotional exhaustion, and service recovery performance: customer orientation as a moderator. They found out that the four customer-related social stressors (i.e. disproportionate customer expectations, disliked customers and customers' verbal aggression) are influential determinants to increase emotional exhaustion and as a result, service recovery performance is undermined by emotional exhaustion.

This study therefore tests the following hypotheses:

H<sub>o1</sub>: Frontline job knowledge does not have any significant effect on customer patronage on four star hotels in Port Harcourt.

H<sub>o2</sub>: Interactive skills of a frontline employee do not have any significant relationship on customer patronage of four star hotels in Port Harcourt.

Ho3: Staff customer engagement skills do not have any significant effect on customer patronage of four star hotels in Port Harcourt.

## METHODOLOGY

For the purpose of this study, the survey research design was adopted and questionnaire structured in 5 point Likert scale was administered to the

respondents as the research instrument. The population of the study is made up of customers of selected four star hotels in Port Harcourt. The accessible population is the number of customer who have been patronizing these four star hotels in Port Harcourt for one year period. Creswell and Creswell (2018) opined that judgmental sampling technique can be adopted when the population of a study is unknown. Hence, the study adopted judgmental sampling technique so as to arrive at a usage sample size. The appropriate sample size was chosen using the Judgmental sample method which is a non-probability sample method was used. A total of 140 copies of questionnaire were distributed to the seven (7) four star hotels in Port Harcourt and twenty copies each were distributed to each.

Primary source of data was used for this research. These are data that were obtained directly from the respondents. The data collection method included the use of the questionnaire. The researcher used a 5-point Likert scale in measurement of the research instrument. Measures used included the following: Strongly disagree (1), Disagree (2), Undecided (3), Agree (4), and strongly agree (5). To ensure the validity of this proposed research, the researcher subjected the instrument to the Supervisor's corrections in order to make sure that the instrument was be relied upon for consistent measurement. Cronbach alpha coefficients were used to ascertain the reliability of the constructs with 0.70 as the benchmark (Nunnally, 1978). The result of the reliability test is as follows:

Table 1: Reliability Analysis of the Variables.

S/ N	Items	No. of Items	Cronbach's Alpha
1.	Job Knowledge	4	.775
2.	Interactive Skills	4	.873
3.	Engagement Skills	4	.916
4.	Customer Patronage	2	.875
5.	Customer Repeat Purchase	4	.789

Source: SPSS Output, 2018

The study analyzed collected data according to the stated objectives of the study.

Analyses were done with simple regression model with the aid of Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 22.0.

The model is specified below.

$$Y = f(X_1, X_2, X_3)$$

I.e. Y is the function of  $X_1, X_2, X_3$

where y = Consumer Patronage

and x = Functionality

Job Knowledge; Interactive Skills and Customer Engagement.

### DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The analyses of data are presented below according to the stated objectives of the study:

To examine the effect of job knowledge on customer patronage of four star Hotels in Port Harcourt

Table 2: Regression analysis showing effect of job knowledge on customer patronage of four star Hotels in Port Harcourt

Variable	Coefficient	Std. Error	t-value
Constant	4.482	0.318	14.093
Job Knowledge	0.518	0.173	2.995**
F-Statistics	16.260		
Prob > F	0.004		
R-squared	0.684		
Adj R-squared	0.535		
N	135		

Source: SPSS Output, 2018

Note: \*\* = Significant at 5% level

The regression result in Table 2 explains the effect of job knowledge on customer patronage of four star Hotels in Port Harcourt. The regression analysis tried to estimate the strength and the nature of the effect of job knowledge on customer patronage of four star Hotels in Port Harcourt.

Job knowledge was significant at 5% probability level and with a positive value. This shows a positive and direct effect of job knowledge on customer patronage of four star Hotels in Port Harcourt. As the frontline employees of the studied four star Hotels in Port Harcourt continue to gain more job knowledge, it brings about increased customer satisfaction vis-à-vis increased customer patronage for the Hotels. Similarly, the  $r^2$  value was 0.684, which indicates that about 68% of the variation found in customer patronage in the studied Hotels was accounted for by frontline employee job knowledge. Additionally, the F-ratio value of 16.260 indicates that the model specification was significantly correct at 5%.

To ascertain the effect of staff interactive skills on customer repeat purchase of four star Hotels in Port Harcourt

Table 3 Regression analysis showing the effect of staff interactive skills on customer repeat purchase of four star Hotels in Port Harcourt

Variable	Coefficient	Std. Error	t-value
Constant	4.793	0.793	12.013
Staff interactive skills	0.611	0.167	3.658**
F-Statistics	14.096		
Prob > F	0.001		
R-squared	0.657		
Adj R-squared	0.513		
N	135		

Source: SPSS Output, 2018

Note: \*\* = Significant at 5% level

Table 3 shows the influence of staff interactive Skills on the customer repeat purchase of four star hotels in Port Harcourt. From the simple regression analysis table, Staff interactive Skills were found to be statistically significant at 5% and with a positive figure. This implies that an increase or improvement in frontline staff interactive skills will result to an increase in customer repeat purchase. The R square value of 0.657 shows that 66% of variation in customer repeat purchase was accounted for by interactive skills of staff of the four star hotels. Empirically, this conforms to the findings of Wan (2015), who concluded that staff interactive skills are vital for improved customer satisfaction and patronage for hospitality industry. Similarly, the f-ratio value of 14.096 indicates

that the model specification was fit and significant at 5%. The null hypothesis is hereby rejected and it can be concluded that staff interactive skills have significant effect on customer repeat purchase.

To determine the effect of staff engagement skills on customer patronage of four star Hotel in Port Harcourt

Table 4: Regression analysis showing the effect of staff engagement skills on customer patronage of four star Hotel in Port Harcourt

Variable	Coefficient	Std. Error	t-value
Constant	4.354	0.408	10.672
Staff Engagement skills	0.571	0.151	3.781***
F-Statistics	16.379		
Prob > F	0.000		
R-squared	0.794		
Adj R-squared	0.727		
N	135		

Source: SPSS Output, 2018

Note: \*\*\*= Significant at 1% level

The regression result in Table 4 explains the effect of staff engagement skills on customer patronage of four star Hotels in Port Harcourt. Staff engagement skills was found to be significant at 1% probability level and positively related to customer patronage of four star Hotels in Port Harcourt. This shows a positive effect of staff engagement skills on customer patronage of four star Hotels in Port Harcourt. As staff engagement skills within the studied four star Hotels increase, customer patronage also increases. This is as a result of the increased service offered to customers which increases their patronage. The R square value was 0.794, which indicates that about 79% of the variation found in customer patronage was accounted for by staff engagement skills. Additionally, the F-ratio value of 16.379 indicates that the model specification was significantly correct at 1%.

#### DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The study focused on the effect of Frontline Functionality on Customer Patronage of four star Hotels in Port Harcourt. Our  $H_{01}$  that is in null form which states that Frontline job knowledge does not have any significant effect on

customer patronage on four star hotels in Port Harcourt was rejected as the regression result shows that job knowledge was significant at 5% probability level and with positive value. Similarly, the  $r^2$  value was 0.684, which indicates that about 68% of the variation found in customer patronage in the studied for star hotels were accounted by Frontline employee job knowledge. Additionally, the F-rate value of 16.260 indicates that the model specification was significantly correct at 5%. In Ewoh(2016), on the study of job knowledge on Frontline functionality. The hypothesis revealed a significant relationship between the job knowledge on referral statistically stated at  $r= 0.712$  and PV as 0.000. They therefore, state that job knowledge of a front desk officer of four star hotels has what it takes to make customers stay with them and even refer the hotel to others. In the work of Streukens and Andreassen (2009), this is on Frontline Employees' Personality traits: Customer preference and homophily effect. They conclude that, the customers have a clear preference for Frontline employees they perceived to have a similar personality to their own personality traits and that there is a positive relationship between the customer's preference for a conscientious employee and the customer's own level of conscientiousness (homophily effect conscientiousness).

In the work of Palumbo, Miller, Shalin and Steele-Johnson (2005); on the impact of Job knowledge in the cognitive ability performance relationship which they used a written measure of job knowledge that was developed using a cognitive approach. The results show that job knowledge mediate relationship between cognitive ability. Cognitive ability accounted for 12% of variance in performance, job knowledge account for 26% of the variance.

In our  $H_{02}$ , that states interactive skills of a frontline employee do not have any significant relationship on customer patronage of four star hotels in Port Harcourt in null form was rejected given that the simple regression analysis shows a statistical significant relationship between the two variables tested at 5% and a positive figure. This implies that an increase or improvement in frontline staff interactive skills will result to an increase in customer repeat purchase. The R square value of 0.657 shows that 66% of variation in customer repeat purchase was accounted for by interactive skills of staff of the four star hotels in Port Harcourt. Empirically, this conforms to the findings of Wan (2015), who concluded that staff interactive skills are vital for improved customer satisfaction and patronage for hospitality industry. Similarly, the f-ratio value of 14.096 indicates that the model specification was fit and significant at 5%. The null

hypothesis is hereby rejected and it can be concluded that staff interactive skills have significant effect on customer repeat purchase.

In the work of Ewoh, (2016); in their work of Front Desk Functionality and Customer Patronage of Four Star Hotels, in their hypothesis of interactive skills and customer repeat purchase shows that there is a significant relationship between the two variables which are both positive and very strong statistical result of ( $r=0.728$ ) with the PV of .000. they conclude that interactive skills of front desk employee in four star hotels is positively related to repeat purchase. In the work of Steukens and Anreassen (2009), they conclude that there is a positive relationship between the customer's preference for emotionally stable employee and the customer's own level of emotional stability (homophily effect emotional stability). In their  $H_{02}$  regarding the influence of "level of interaction intensity on the magnitude of the homophily effect. They conclude that the result is significant for the customer's own conscientiousness and the degree of employee-customer interaction ( $B+3=0.58$ ;  $P=0.05$ ), they conclude that the homophily effect for conscientiousness for low contact services. In Rutherford (1985), he concludes that guest satisfaction, good relationship with quest peers and colleagues were closely linked to good interactive skills thereby leading to increase in customer patronage and positively related.

In our  $H_{03}$  that states that staff customer engagement skills do not have any significant effect on customer patronage of four star hotels in Port Harcourt. Staff engagement skills was found to be significant at 1% probability level and positively related to customer patronage of four star hotels in Port Harcourt. As staff engagement skills within the studied four star hotels increase customer patronage also increase. The R square value was 0.794, which indicates about 79% of variation found in customer patronage was found in customer patronage was accounted for by staff engagement skills. Additionally, the F-ratio value of 16.379 indicates that the model specification was significantly correct at 1%.

In the work of Pedraza, Mesa and Gaviria (2016); innovative Behaviour and Employee engagement; they conclude that innovative behavior is highly influenced by employee engagement skills that employee engagement skill has a key role in the business operation especially in design tasks, elaboration and implementation service. Nevertheless, the results obtained cannot be as conclusive, because the study focused only in one firm. Finally on the discussion, the study of Aliyu(2014), the summary found that the demographic characteristics of price of banquet service location and tangible aspect of



SERVQUAL did not influence customer satisfaction. However, reliability or employee skill, responsiveness or interactive skill, assurance or engagement skills and empathy dimensions of SERVQUAL influenced the customer satisfaction on quality service and customer patronage of hotels. Our position in this study is that all variables tested, employee job knowledge, employee interactive skills and staff engagement skills are strongly significant to customer patronage of four star hotels in Port Harcourt.

## 5. Summary of Findings

- i. From the analysis, it was ascertained that Frontline job knowledge has an effect on customer patronage. And this is true because the frontline officer is the first contact between the Hotel and the customers, and their knowledge of their job specification will go a long way to determine if the guest will patronize the Hotel or not. Alhaddad (2016) worked customer satisfaction and loyalty in hotel industry: the mediating role of relationship marketing. (PLS Approach). Their findings indicate that customer satisfaction, trust on hotel and affective commitment positively correlated to customer loyalty.
- ii. It was found that sound interactive skills enhance customer repeat purchase in four star Hotels in the sense that they give the customers a sense of belonging which creates a lasting service experience. Satisfied customers are those who the service of the four star hotels meets with their expectations. Through awareness of how staff interacts with others, and with practice, they can improve their interpersonal skills. This study also highlights the importance of employee-customer interactions in order to satisfy customer and generate their engagement. (Cambra-Fierro, 2014).
- iii. Lastly, staff engagement skills affect customer patronage of four star hotels in Port Harcourt, Rivers State, since customers tend to be loyal to hospitality service providers whose services engage their senses. Engagement skills if improved upon will avail a more rewarding experience both for the Hotels and their customers. Doorn et al (2010), commented on engaged customer can improve the reputation and financial value of companies.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study examined frontline functionality and Customer Patronage of four star hotels in Port Harcourt, Rivers State. The study unveiled that job knowledge,

interactive and engagement skills have significant positive effect on customer patronage. This implies that effective and efficient improvement on the capacity of the frontline officers can significantly increase customer patronage, market share and boost consumers' confidence on the services provided by the four star hotels.

The following recommendations are offered owing to the finding of this study:

- a. Firms in the hospitality industry should always improve on the staff knowledge of their jobs and the services they render so as to improve on customer patronage.
- b. Interpersonal skill is vital for improved customer patronage, and employees should therefore be sent on training and development seminars that will help in building their interactive skills.
- c. Frontline officers should be encouraged to be proactive at every stage of service negotiation and should strive to engage the senses of the customers, as this will lead continuous customer patronage.

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