

Gustative Marketing Strategy and Customers Patronage of Restaurant Businesses in Port Harcourt

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Abstract: *The purpose of this study was to empirically research the extent to which gustative marketing strategy relates to customers patronage of restaurant businesses in Port Harcourt. The quantitative research method which utilized a cross-sectional survey research design was adopted in the study. The target population comprised of all the customers of 369 registered restaurants in Port Harcourt, Rivers State as listed in Rivers State Yellow Page Directory, and this population is an infinite population; hence the Godden (2004) infinite sampling technique was deployed which gave us a sample size of 384. Three hundred and seventy one (371) copies of questionnaire out of the distributed 384 were valid and used for the study. The main research instrument (copies of questionnaire) was validated through expert checking while Cronbach Alpha Test was used to check for its reliability. The findings of the study showed that gustative marketing strategy has significant positive relationships with the measures of customers' patronage (customer repeat purchase, and customer referral). Hence the study concluded that gustative marketing strategies significantly influence customers' patronage in restaurants businesses in Port Harcourt. The study recommends restaurants management applications of gustative marketing strategy cues such as ensuring they offer customers good tasty meals, come up with a unique taste for their meals that is not easily imitated, and should maintain consistency in these unique tastes.*

Keywords: *Customer Patronage, Gustative marketing. Strategy. Repeat Purchase, Customer Referral.*

Introduction

Customer patronage is what every business lives for because with it comes return on investment and profitability which helps drive the business to attain growth and expansion in its industry. Customers of today according to Nwachukwu et al. (2022) change their taste and preference more often to attune to the current trends and innovations. Hence businesses invest in strategies and techniques to appeal and attract customers' patronage to their investment than competitors through several marketing communication medium. Today's customers are knowledgeable and well exposed to the gimmicks of advertising efforts and will easily ignore an advertising campaign that took huge amount of money to put together, rather will believe on referrals from friends and relatives before patronizing a product or brand. What better way to reach these skeptic customers than appealing to their emotions and subconscious minds through sensory marketing techniques as in the case of restaurant businesses through the sense of taste (Gustative marketing strategy).

Marketing has evolved from traditional marketing practices which revolves around transaction (Kotler, 1997) to emotional marketing (Psychological marketing) where the consumers are appealed to patronize or purchase a product or brand based on their feelings. No wonder Harvey (2018) asserts that no matter how much one would like to think of him or herself as a logical, rational person, human beings are slaves to emotion. Classical economics saw consumer as a rational being who tries to maximize the small amount of money he has to achieve utility, but current scholars have come to realize that not only reduced price can motivate a consumer when buying, but his emotions through the senses can play a major role too in his purchase decisions. Consumers' emotions and psychological experience towards a business product or services is vital for business survival because it will bring about love for the business and possible repeat patronage (Nwachukwu & Maudlinepac, 2022). That is why sensory marketing which appeals to the emotions of the customers via the five senses became a key practice in today's contemporary marketing, and the gustative sensory marketing practice is being investigated in this study as a way to revive customers patronage among restaurants businesses in Port Harcourt through appealing to customers taste.

AllSense (2014) asserts that gustative marketing is most often used for beverage and foods. These products are edible and needs to be tasted, hence marketers utilize the sense of taste to appeal to customers and have competitive edge over competition. No wonder New York Food Truck Association (NYFTA, 2020) asserts that in sensory marketing, taste is a creative and unique way of telling your brand's story while creating a lasting impression on your customers' through giving them memorable moments. Hence gustative marketing cues can actually serve as a good strategy to be utilized by restaurant business in Port Harcourt to beat the challenges of stiff competitions which have made most of the businesses fizzle out and disinvested by offering customers unique taste that will live a lasting impression on them which will keep them wanting for more.

Although several studies have tried investigating the impact of taste on consumers behavior (Namkung & Jang, 2007; Uddin, 2011; Min & Min, 2011; Donkoh et al., 2012; Huang & Dang, 2014; Samoggia et al., 2020) there tends to exist scarce empirical research work on the impact of gustative marketing strategy on customers patronage of restaurant businesses within the context of Port Harcourt dwelling on restaurants in this area using unique taste signals to encourage customers' repeat purchase and referral, hence our point of departure.

Aim of the Study

The sole aim of the study was to investigate empirically the extent of relationship existing between gustative marketing strategies and customers patronage of restaurants businesses in Port Harcourt, Rivers state.

Research Question

Based on the aim of the study, the following research question was formulated:

1. To what extent does gustative marketing strategy relates to customers patronage of restaurants businesses in Port Harcourt, Rivers state?

Research Hypotheses

Ho₁: There is no significant relationship between gustative marketing strategy and customer repeat purchase in restaurant businesses in Port Harcourt, Rivers state.

Ho₂: There is no significant relationship between gustative marketing strategy and customer referral of restaurants business in Port Harcourt, Rivers state.

Review of Related Literature

Theoretical Foundation

The theoretical underpinning of this study is the Stimuli, Organism and Response Model by Mehrabian and Russell (1974) which proves how an individual responds to environmental stimulus and this theory was adopted from the environmental psychology theory. Environmental psychology states that emotional response to the environment moderates the relationship between the environment and one's behavior (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974; Wu, et al., 2008). The Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) illustrates how the environment serves as stimulus (S), which is made up of a group of signals that causes an individual (O) to internally evaluate the cues and then generate a response (R) (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974 cited in Nwachukwu & Origbo, 2022).

The S-O-R model by Mehrabian & Russell (1974) was employed in this study clearly lays emphasis on how organisms such as the customer will respond to stimulus like the taste of a meal they ate in a restaurant or perceived to be tasty by patronizing the restaurant because of this cue. The emotional attachment of a customer for example toward good tasty meal has being proven by this theory to play a vital role in their response to the exposed cues and stimulus from the environment (restaurant).

Concept of Gustative Marketing Strategy

Gustative marketing strategy is a marketing technique that tries to appeal to the customer's sense of taste. Collinsdictionary.com defined gustation as the act of tasting or the faculty of taste. Gustatory perception according to Kikut-Ligai and Trzcielinska-Lorvch (2017) is made possible by the peripheral chemosensory organs, i.e., the taste buds, which are distributed in the epithelium of the taste papillae of the palate, epiglottis, tongue, throat and larynx. Hence the mouth is a very strong sense for tasting edible products such as those sold by fast food restaurants. That is why AllSense (2014) asserts that gustative marketing is most often used for beverage and foods. These products are edible and needs to be tasted, hence marketers utilize the sense of taste to appeal to customers and have competitive edge over competition. No wonder New York Food Truck Association (NYFTA, 2020) asserts that in sensory marketing, taste is a creative and unique way of telling your brand's story while creating a lasting impression on your customers' through giving them memorable moments.

The use of taste by marketers to lure customers to purchase edible product has been a well-known technique within the context of Nigeria. For instance, An Hausa man selling Suya (a locally roasted meat) will offer intending customers a little piece of meat to taste and know how sweet the meat is which will eventually encourage the buyer to ask for even more than he or she has intended buying. When it comes to edible commodities such as products sold by fast food

restaurants in Rivers State, several fast food management have failed to use taste as a visible advertising cue to attract customers to engage with their businesses unlike those in the Western world and the United States of America have done.

For instant, Hassan and Iqbal (2016) argued that during the use of promotional technique, marketing managers tries to compare the taste of their product with that of competitors through advertising the taste to induce the customer or through offering the product for free tasting, or through sampling. Such type of promotional activities according to Rieunier (2000) makes the customer readily want to buy the product once they tasted and liked it.

Taste being a strong component of the senses has been proven to have a link with smell. According to Studentshare (n.d.), “there is a close link between taste and smell; different studies have proven that a dislike for a taste of food leads to a dislike for the smell of that same food.” This simply implies that, the moment an individual tastes and dislikes a particular meal or product, he or she will instantly hate the smell of it because he/she will attach the smell to the bad taste of the product. Hence, a bad taste can make a product to fail. International Taste Institute (n.d.) argues that “even a well-known brand’s security cannot save the product if the customer doesn’t find its taste appealing.

Companies and marketers have come to realize the great impact the taste of their edible products have on customers perception of their brand and have tried improving on the taste to meet customers desire. Cannentererre et al. (2012) supports this assertion when they stated that in order to meet customer’s expectation, food industry came up with laboratories where they conduct test on new trends and develop new taste for customers. This shows that taste is a strong sensory marketing tool for appealing to fast food restaurant customers. This assertion is in line with the submission of NYFTA (2020) which states that the psychology of taste in, what’s known as, sensory marketing is a powerful tool that’s part of a consumer-strategy designed to tap into intense emotions of pleasure, while creating new memories or rekindling old ones. From the conceptual review above, it is clear that gustative marketing strategy which deals with the use of taste to appeal to customers’ emotional experience is a good strategy fast food restaurant managements in Rivers Sate can use to make a difference and stay ahead of competition. Next in line to be discussed is the concept of our criterion variable which is customers’ engagement.

Concept of Customer Patronage

There has been wide study about consumer behaviors within and outside marketing discipline. One of the major attribute of consumer behavior is patronage. Customer patronage according to Simons (2016) is the support or approval made available by customers with regards to a specific brand. While Raji et al. (2020) states that patronage could be assumed to mean the material aid and motivation offered by a patron, in this case the patron could be seen to be a customer in an exchange transaction. Concise Oxford English Dictionary (2008, as cited in Adiele et al., 2015), asserts that the word customer patronage signifies an individual or thing that uses something or someone who buys goods and services for personal use. In the case of Dictionary.com, patronage was defined as the financial aid or business given to a hotel, store or the like, by clients,

customers or paying guests. In this study, we define customer patronage as the act of a customer engaging with a business concern so as to buy a product or services. Hence when a customer walks into a restaurant in Port Harcourt and asks for a plate of food, eat and pay his bills, can be assumed as patronage.

Measures of Customer Patronage

Repeat Purchase

There is a popular adage in Igbo land which says that when a road is good, it is being repeatedly used by people, so also a product or services that satisfy consumers' needs and want will be repurchased by them when the need arises (Ikechi et al., 2021). Hence repeat purchasing happens when the customer is satisfied with the previous purchase of that product item. For instance, when an individual for the first time buys a meal from a restaurant in Port Harcourt and finds the food delicious and appealing, he or she will come back later for same delicacy when next the need arises and will also inform friends about the restaurant. Repeat purchase according to Tardi (2019) can be defined as purchases that customers make to replace the same items or services that they had bought and consumed previously. For Leonard (2019), repeat purchase is the purchase by a consumer of a same-brand product as bought on a previous occasion. It is where consumers regularly purchase a brand (Hfonfe, 2012). ActiveDemand (2014) defined repeat purchase as the purchase by a consumer of a same-brand product as bought on a previous occasion. While BusinessDictionary.com defines repeat purchase as the buying of a product by a consumer of the same brand name previously bought on another occasion. Customer engagement can be shown through their repeat purchase behavior. That is why McCandless (2018) states that the rate of repeat purchase gives you a clearer snapshot of the effectiveness of your entire retention strategy because it tells you how many customers are engaged enough to make more than one purchase at your store.

Customer Referral

Referral according to dictionary.cambridge.org is the act of directing someone to a different place or person for information. Tax et al., (1993, as cited in Helm, 2003) defined referral as informal communication, both positive and negative, between consumers about characteristics of a business and/or its goods and services. Also, Wheeler (1987, as cited in Helm, 2003) defined referral to represent one form of favorable word of mouth that is passed on by a customer about a certain product or service. Arndt (as cited in Wirtz et al., 2013) defined WOM referral as an oral, person to person communication between a perceived non-commercial communication and a receiver concerning a brand, a product or a service, offered for sale. Askoy et al. (2011) argues that there are many reasons why consumers are motivated to engage in WOM activity which a few examples include (a) helping others, (b) sharing experiences and promoting self-concept, and (c) product involvement.

Empirical Review on Gustative Marketing Strategy and Customers' engagement

Customers' taste have been empirically shown to have an impact on customers' patronage in terms of purchase, repeat patronage and referral mostly when it comes to edible products such as those offered by restaurants' business. Most empirical studies evaluated impact of taste on consumer behavior based on the taste of coffee and food.

This assertion can be proven in the empirical study of Huang and Dang (2014) on purchase intentions on coffee beverage in Taiwan, which utilized quota sampling technique to sample the population of students and people around Kaohsiung province in regards to factors that motivates them to purchase coffee. Three hundred and thirty (330) copies of survey questionnaire were distributed out of which 280 were returned. After dusting and checking of the returned copies of questionnaire, 260 copies from the respondents were valid and used for the analysis which was carried out by the use of exploratory factor analysis and regression analysis. The study found out that the taste of the coffee has a significant influence on customers' engagement and purchase intention.

Drawing from this finding, it suggests that taste of items such as coffee, even fast food groceries to a great extent will influence customers' engagement with a particular brand of fast food restaurant over others. Most of the studies on taste considered factors that influence the use of an item such as coffee based on taste, and not factors for nonuse. Hence, taste has also proven a factor for the non-use of coffee by respondents.

To prove this statement, Samoggia et al. (2020) conducted an empirical study on "emotions, functional needs and perceptions of consumers of coffee and non-consumers" in Italy and Portugal utilizing 467 face-to-face interviews with consumers and the use of online questionnaire. The Bartlett's test of sphericity and Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy were used to calculate the appropriateness of the data for factor analysis. Chi-square statistics method was utilizing in carrying out the analysis and the researchers found out that Non-consumption of coffee is mainly driven by factors such as its bitter taste. Hence, bitter taste of the coffee significantly influences customers' action in not buying and consuming the coffee.

Looking at taste away from coffee to food, Namkung and Jang (2007) empirically evaluated the importance of food quality in relation to consumer satisfaction and behavioral intentions in mid-to upscale restaurants. Using regression analysis, the study found out that, food quality significantly influenced customer satisfaction and behavioral intent. It discovered that food taste and presentation were the two greatest contributors to the satisfaction of customer and behavioral intentions.

Supporting this assertion is the study of Min and Min (2011) which investigates service quality and customer satisfaction in fast food restaurant franchises in the USA. Utilizing competitive gap analysis and analytic hierarchy process, the study found that "the taste of the food was the most important restaurant attribute in fast food restaurant customers' perceptions and eventual satisfaction."

Donkoh et al. (2012) also conducted a study on "customer satisfaction and perceptions about food services on the University for Development Studies Campus, Ghana. Using purposive sampling method, two restaurants (Lovely Sisters and Alimento) were selected based on their high patronage level. The researchers designed a semi-structured questionnaire which was issued to 240 respondents in both mentioned restaurants during the second session of 2009/2010 academic year. Regression analysis was used to analyze the retrieved data, and the finding

proved that “pleasing appearance and taste of food were the significant determinants of the frequency of visits to Restaurant.

Taste as regarding beverages were not left out in the empirical evaluation on the impact of taste (gustation) on customers’ engagement. In the study of Uddin (2011) on the effect sensory branding of five senses have on customers: A case study of Coca Cola in Karlstad, Sweden which the population of the study consisted of students of Karlstad University, and a sample size of twenty students where administered copies of questionnaire for the study. Data were analyzed using Pearson moment correlation through SPSS package. And the finding of the study showed that taste aspects of Coca Cola have strong impact on consumers’ patronage.

Table 1: Summary of Empirical Studies on Gustative Marketing Strategy

Author(s)/ Year	Area of Study	Analytical tool used	Findings
Samoggia et al. (2020)	Emotions, functional needs & perceptions of consumers of coffee and non-consumers” in Italy and Portugal.	Bartlett’s test of sphericity, Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin measure of sampling adequacy & Chi-square statistics.	Non-consumption of coffee is mainly driven by factors such as its bitter taste. Hence, bitter taste of the coffee significantly influences customers’ action in not buying and consuming the coffee.
Huang and Dang (2014)	An empirical analysis on purchase intention on coffee beverage in Taiwan	Exploratory factor analysis & regression analysis	The taste of the coffee has a significant influence on customers’ engagement and purchase intention.
Donkoh et al. (2012)	Customer satisfaction and perceptions about food services on the University for Development Studies Campus, Ghana	Regression analysis.	Pleasing appearance and taste of food were the significant determinants of the frequency of visits to Restaurant.
Min and Min (2011)	Service quality and customer satisfaction in fast food restaurant franchises in the USA.	Competitive gap analysis & analytic hierarchy process.	The taste of the food was the most important restaurant attribute in fast food restaurant customers’ perceptions and eventual satisfaction.
Uddin (2011)	The effect sensory branding of five senses have on customers: A case study of Coca Cola in Karlstad, Sweden.	Pearson moment correlation.	Taste aspects of Coca Cola have strong impact on consumers’ patronage.
Namkung and Jang (2007)	The importance of food quality in relation to consumer satisfaction and behavioral intentions in mid-to upscale restaurants.	Regression analysis.	1) Food quality significantly influenced customer satisfaction and behavioral intent. 2) It discovered that food taste and presentation were the two greatest contributors to the satisfaction of customer and behavioral intentions.

Source: Researchers Desktop from Literature Review

Based on these assertions and findings, we formulate our next set of hypotheses:

Ho₁ There is no significant relationship between gustative marketing strategy and customer repeat purchase in fast food restaurants in Rivers state.

Ho₂ There is no significant relationship between gustative marketing strategy and customer referral in fast food restaurants in Rivers state.

Operational Conceptual Framework

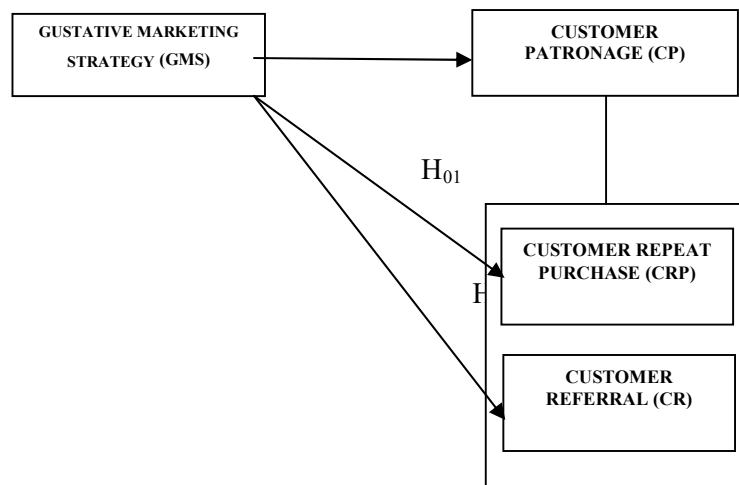


Figure 1: Operational Conceptual Framework for the Relationship between Gustative Marketing Strategy and Customer Patronage.

Research Methodology

The study adopted a quantitative research method and utilized a cross-sectional survey research design. The target population comprised of all the customers of 369 registered restaurants in Port Harcourt, Rivers State as listed in Rivers State Yellow Page Directory, and this population is an infinite population; hence the Godden (2004) infinite sampling technique was deployed which gave us a sample size of 384. Using convenient sampling technique, the study distributed 384 copies of questionnaire out of which 371 was valid and was used in carrying out the study's analysis. The study utilized the primary data collection method of the use of copies of questionnaire which was validated through an expert checking. Cronbach's Alpha technique was employed for checking for the reliability of the instrument. The reliability coefficients of our constructs were above 0.70 benchmark recommended by Nunnally (1978).

Table 2: Reliability Statistics

S/N	Construct	No of items	Cronbach's Alpha
1.	Gustative Marketing Strategy	3	0.811
2.	Repeat Purchase	3	0.852
3.	Referral	3	0.873

Source: SPSS Result

Analyses of Data Results

384 copies of the questionnaire were distributed among purposefully selected customers of identified registered functional restaurants in Port Harcourt. Due to incomplete responses and mistakes, 9 copies were dropped, while 4 copies were lost in transit. Hence, the total response rate that formed the basis of our analysis was 371 which represent 97%. The study adopted Pearson moment correlation coefficient through SPSS version 25 to analyze the relationships between the study variables. The tables below explain the tests results of the hypotheses. The Decision Rule for the test states that the null hypothesis (H_0) should be rejected while the alternative (H_a) accepted if $p\text{-value} < 0.05$ for 2 – tailed test and conclude that significant relationship exists.

Test of Hypothesis 1

H_{01} : There is no significant relationship between gustative marketing strategy and customer repeat purchase in restaurants businesses in Port Harcourt.

H_{a1} : There is a significant relationship between gustative marketing strategy and customer repeat purchase in restaurants businesses in Port Harcourt.

Table 3: Correlations Analysis of Gustative Strategy and Customer Repeat Purchase

Variables 1	Statistics	Gustative Marketing Strategy (GMS)	Customer Repeat Purchase (CRP)
Gustative Marketing	Pearson Correlation	1.000	.831**
Strategy (GMS)	Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.000
	N	371	371
Customer Repeat Purchase	Correlation Coefficient	.831**	1.000
(CRP)	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.
	N	371	371

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

b. Listwise N = 371

Source: SPSS Output (based on 2022 Field Survey Data)

Table 3 above shows the result of the correlation analysis using the SPSS version 25.0. The Pearson correlation coefficient was estimated to be 0.831**. This indicates that a significant positive relationship exists between gustative marketing strategy and customer repeat purchase. Since the p-value (0.000) < 0.05, we reject the null hypothesis and conclude that a significant relationship exists between the two variables.

Test of Hypothesis 2

Ho₂: There is no significant relationship between gustative marketing strategy and customer referral of restaurant business in Port Harcourt.

Ha₂: There is a significant relationship between gustative marketing strategy and customer referral of restaurants business in Port Harcourt.

Table 4: Correlations Analysis of Gustative Marketing Strategy and Customer Referral.

Variables 1	Statistics	Gustative Marketing Strategy (GMS)	Customer Referral (CR)
Gustative Marketing	Pearson Correlation	1.000	.866**
Strategy (GMS)	Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.000
	N	371	371
Customer Referral	Correlation Coefficient	.866**	1.000
(CR)	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.
	N	371	371

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

b. Listwise N = 371

Source: SPSS Output (based on 2022 Field Survey Data)

Table 4 above also indicates that the correlation coefficient (*r*) is 0.866. This suggests that a very strong relationship exists between gustative marketing strategy and customer referral. Also, the sign of (*r*) value is positive, indicating a direct link between the variables. Since the probability value (p-value) = 0.000 < 0.05, we conclude that a significant positive relationship exists between gustative marketing strategy and customer referral of restaurant business in Port Harcourt.

Table 5: Summary of Test Hypotheses

S/N	HYPOTHESES	(<i>r</i>)	P – VALUE	DIRECTIO N	Magnitude	DECISION	CONCLUSION
H ₀₁ :	There is no significant relationship between gustative marketing strategy and customer repeat purchase.	0.831**	0.00	+VE	Very high	Reject	Significant
H ₀₂ :	There is no significant relationship between gustative marketing strategy and customer referral	0.866**	0.00	+VE	Very high	Reject	Significant

Source: Research Findings Based on SPSS Output

Discussion of Findings

The objective of this study was to investigate the extent to which gustative marketing strategy relates to customer patronage of restaurant businesses in Port Harcourt. Gustative marketing strategy was found to have a significant positive relationship with the measures of customer patronage (customer repeat purchase and customer referral). This finding was gotten from the outcome of the statistical test of hypotheses H₀₁, and H₀₂. The test of H₀₁ shows that gustative marketing strategy attracts a significant positive correlation coefficient ($r = 0.831$, $p\text{-value} < 0.05$). Signifying that, the more restaurants utilizes gustative marketing strategies such as pleasant taste, consistency in taste, and unique flavor, the more they will achieve increased customer patronage in the form of customer repeat purchase.

Test of H₀₂ reveals that gustative marketing strategy generates a significant positive correlation coefficient ($r = 0.866$, $p\text{-value} < 0.05$). Thus, increase in gustative marketing strategies will bring about an increase in customers referral of a given restaurant due to their pleasant experience with the business.

The foregoing findings as seen from the results of hypotheses 1 and 2 are believed to be premised on the fact that gustative marketing strategies such as good tasty meals, unique taste that's hard to imitate, maintain consistency in taste of product influences customers' patronage behaviors since it will get them satisfied, purchase more, frequently visit the restaurant and refer it to friends and relatives. This is in line with the submissions of Donkoh, et al. (2012) whose study found that pleasing appearance and taste of food were the significant determinants of customers' frequency of visits to a Restaurant. Also, it is similar to the findings of Namkung and Jang (2007) which discovered that food taste and presentation were the two greatest contributors to the satisfaction of customer and behavioral intentions. Towing the same line is the findings by Min and Min (2011) which clearly states that the taste of the food was the most important restaurant attribute in fast food restaurant customers' perceptions and eventual satisfaction.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Based on the data analyses results and findings, the study conclude that gustative marketing strategy has significant positive impact on customers' patronage of restaurants business in Port Harcourt. The findings as seen from the results of the hypotheses are believed to be premised on the fact that gustative marketing strategies such as good tasty meals, unique taste that's hard to imitate, maintain consistency in taste of product influences customers' patronage behaviors. This study hence recommends restaurants management applications of gustative marketing strategy cues such as ensuring they offer customers good tasty meals, come up with a unique taste for their meals that is not easily imitated, and should maintain consistency in these unique tastes.

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