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Contact Employee Rewards System and Customer Loyalty of Healthcare Firms in South-South, Nigeria

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Abstract: This study determined the link between the contact employee rewards system and customer loyalty of healthcare firms in South-South, Nigeria. The study adopted an explanatory research design and collected data from eighty-five (85) staff and patients of the studied healthcare providers using a structured questionnaire. The Spearman's Rank Order Correlation served as the test statistic relying on SPSS version 21.0. The study observed that contact employee rewards systems have a positive and statistically significant relationship with customer loyalty. The study thus work-life balance significantly relate to customers loyalty and customers loyalty expressed as resistance to switching, repeat patronage, and word of mouth hinges on the healthcare providers' contact employee rewards system. As such, the study recommends that the healthcare firms that seek to improve customers' loyalty should consider an attractive contact employee rewards system as an essential mechanism and the healthcare firms should consider appropriate employee rewards system as an imperative strategy to improve on customers' resistance to switching behavior, repeat patronage and positive word of mouth.

Keywords:

Keywords: *Rewards System, Resistance to Switching, Repeat Patronage, Word-Of-Mouth and Customer Loyalty*

INTRODUCTION

The rapidly evolving value requirements of customers, globalization and innovations in technology, dynamic nature of the contemporary business environment coupled with new business concepts, formats, and activities of competitors have made it imperative for firms to look inward for strategies that elicit customer loyalty and confer sustainable competitive advantage. Customer loyalty is customers' predisposition to prefer one brand and its products over those of competitors, based on the satisfaction they derive from using the brand's products (Sima & Elham, 2015). It is the attitude of customers to prefer a brand due to satisfaction derived from using that brand or other psychological, economic, or social reasons (Otite & Didia, 2017).
Research suggests that customers' exhibition of loyalty is anchored on their positive experiences with the service contacts regardless of whether the firm has the best product, price, or service delivery (Singh & Khan, 2012; Otite & Didia, 2017). This position coheres with the assertion that a strong positive customers experience increases customers' loyalty and creates hopes of achieving a sustainable competitive advantage (Sadia, 2011). To provide a quality customers

experience, a company also needs skilled and satisfied employees that could keep up with the demand of providing outstanding customers experience (Mohammad & Afroja, 2013) since service delivery involves interaction between contact employees and customers. Contact employees could influence service quality perception of the patient through their attitude (Bellaouaied & Gam, 2012), as such, they need to be well-trained on better ways to outsell their competitors through service delivery, products knowledge, and also be motivated to assist customers.

As earlier stated, the quickly evolving value requirement of customers, coupled with fierce intra- and inter-industry competition has continually stretched the ability of healthcare providers, especially tertiary healthcare providers' in South-South, Nigeria, to win the loyalty of customers. This is despite these healthcare providers' deployment of novel service delivery strategies aimed at commanding customers' loyalty that engender sustainable competitive edge.

Besides, the notable competition among players in the healthcare sector, there are also indications of palpable dissatisfaction among patients in Nigeria, for the quality of services delivered by the healthcare providers. Ateke (2020) observes that healthcare providers are accused of "wrong diagnoses, mismanagement of health crises, delayed attention, and nonchalant attitude of service personnel and poor service provider-client relationship". These observations cohere with the way patients easily shift patronage from one hospital to another; and even resort to medical tourism in search of better healthcare (Taiye et al., 2017). The unending race for new customers by hospitals is a further demonstration of the suspicion that healthcare providers do not command the loyalty of customers (Sik et al., 2014). The prevalence of disloyalty of healthcare customers may be attributed to healthcare providers' employees' rewards system.

A preliminary survey on rewards systems among healthcare providers' in South-South, Nigeria shows that the tertiary hospitals regularly train their employees on better ways to serve customers but much is yet to be done on employee motivation through a rewards system. Premised on these, this study analyzed the interplay between employee rewards systems and customer loyalty by investigating the relationship between the variables in federal tertiary hospitals in South-South, Nigeria.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Sociological baseline theories

This study on employee rewards system and customer loyalty of healthcare firms in South-South Nigeria is premised on the resource-based theory (Wernerfelt, 1984) which postulates that an organization's performance depends on its resource profile and further explained why some organizations outsmart others and distinctively maintain a prime place in competitive space (Winnie & Franciss, 2016; Didia & Idenedo, 2017); and the core competencies theory (Prahalad & Hamel,1990) which argued that companies already compete during the creation of competences and not only later in the market for products.

Resource-Based Theory: Resource-based theory was proposed by Wernerfelt (1984) specifically to ascertain an organization's resources that can be effectively and efficiently engaged to gain and sustain an edge over competing brands or companies (Maxwell et al., 2014) in an industry. The theory claimed that an organization's performance depends on its resource profile and further explained why some organizations outsmart others and distinctively maintain a prime place in competitive space (Winnie & Franciss, 2016; Didia & Idenedo, 2017). The theory assumed that; there may be variations in the resource profile of organizations within an industry and the resources may not be moveable across organizations as such, the variations could last long (Barney, 1991).

Resources according to Maxwell et al. (2014), is "all assets, capabilities, organizational processes, firm attributes, information, knowledge, controlled by a firm that enables the firm to conceive of and implement strategies that bestow on the firm a competitive advantage". Consequently, for firms to achieve a sustainable competitive edge (Baker & Sinkula, 2005), they must possess key resources, capabilities, and attributes that are valuable, rare, difficult to imitate, and not substitutable which are in turn effectively deployed in the chosen markets (Barney, 1991). Employees (internal customers) of an organization are bestowed with the intangibles capabilities and distinctive attributes naturally and through education that are valuable, rare, difficult to imitate, and in most cases not replaceable which gives credence to the suitability of this theory for the current study.

The current study adapted resource-based theory as a baseline theory considering healthcare firms where the study is domiciled. The healthcare's employees (internal customers) help to create or implement strategies that enhance its efficiency and effectiveness in the marketplace, utilizing their capabilities in providing excellent customer service that in turn build on the healthcares' reputations. This study proposed that internal customer's motivation through an appropriate rewards system will increase the employee's job satisfaction and in turn enhance their service quality delivery to the external customers premise on the notion that, a satisfied and loyal customer will express loyalty through repeat patronage, resistance to switching and positive word of mouth (Butcher et al., 2001).

The Core Competencies Theory: The theory of core competencies was put forward by Prahalad and Hamel (1990); it argued that companies already compete during the creation of competencies and not only later in the market for products. The authors proposed that, instead of structuring a company around diversified business units and end-products, a company should be structured around a few core competencies (Lavina, 2014) because core competencies are extremely difficult to copy and can easily be leveraged to other markets. According to Prahalad and Hamel (1990) as cited in Lavina (2014), "core competencies allow a company to be flexible, respond to a rapidly evolving environment and be prepared for the future". Core competencies as proposed by Hirindu (2017), comprises of organizations' capabilities, resources, and competencies and indistinguishable core competencies pilot to gaining a competitive edge though, it is yet to be proven empirically. Internal customer motivation through an appropriate rewards system may be viewed as a healthcare firm's competencies because; it will lead to external customers' repeat patronage, resistance to switching, and positive word of mouth through service quality delivered by the employee as a result of being satisfied with their job.

The Concept of Rewards System

Research has it that, employees expected level of performance can only be attained effectively and efficiently if they sense a corresponding level of motivation (Bayon, 2013; Muhammad & Md, 2019) which cohere with Walters et al. (2019) assertion that, having the best strategy in place and proper organizational structural design is not an assurance for organizational effectiveness that, it can only be complimented when the employees are motivated to perform at an optimum level. This implies that healthcare's goal of customer loyalty can be achieved and sustained if the employees are motivated with an appropriate reward system and also gives credence to why Ahmed and Rafiq (2000) considered strategic reward as an essential ingredient of Rewards System. Loyalty behaviors expressed by customers are functions of satisfaction derived from the services offered by satisfied employees through the Rewards System (Kukreja, 2017; Ali, 2016). As noted by Md and Dewan 2018), the imperative of internal marketing lies in motivating the employees and encouraging them to offer excellent services to customers to earn their repeat patronage and word-of-mouth marketing.

Reward system as stressed by Bratton and Gold (2003), encompasses monetary, non-monetary, and psychological payments offered by an employer in return for an employee's services. Malhotra et al. (2007) considered reward as the determinants of job commitment and satisfaction while Gross and Friedman (2004) it consists of compensation in form of base pay, short and long-term incentives, benefits and careers development, and career progression. The fundamental belief for the use of rewards according to Vera and Peter (2015) is to motivate or induce behaviors among employees which are considered beneficial for improved performance and retraining behaviors that are detrimental to the achievement of organizational goals and objectives. Consequently, the rewards system serves as an internal marketing ingredient of motivating desired behaviors (Eshun & Duah, 2011; Danish & Usman, 2010) from employees.

The Reward system is classified into three; intrinsic, extrinsic, and social reward (Ishtiaq & Sadia, 2017). According to Ishtiaq and Sadia (2017), an intrinsic reward system is taken care of from the job such as self-sufficiency, and career development opportunities. An extrinsic reward system is based on physical benefits that an organization gives to its employee in the form of salary, bonus, promotion, and incentives while the social reward is derived from interaction and relationships between the members of an organization. According to Serena et al. (2012), there are other mediums like working conditions, worker and employer relationship, training and development opportunities, job security, and the company's overall policies and procedures for rewarding employees but a motivation that comes with rewards is of utmost importance.

Similar to Ishtiaq and Sadia (2017), Serena et al. (2012) considered rewards systems to be either extrinsic or intrinsic, extrinsic rewards systems are tangible rewards and these rewards are external to the job or task performed by the employee. The external rewards system can be in terms of salary/ pay, incentives, bonuses, promotions, job security, etc while intrinsic rewards systems are intangible rewards or psychological rewards like appreciation, meeting the new challenges, positive and caring attitude from employer, and job rotation after attaining the goal (Serena et al., 2012).

There seems to be mix finding in the literature to determine which reward system is more effective to motivate employees to improve their service delivery quality to the customer. Serena et al. (2012) argue that once pay exceeds a subsistence level, intrinsic factors are stronger motivators, and staff motivation requires an intrinsic rewards system such as satisfaction at doing a good job and a sense of doing something worthwhile. Perry et al. (2006) and Srivastava (2001) asserted that financial rewards are not the most motivating factor to employees' job satisfaction and service quality delivery, based on their findings; financial results have a de-motivating effect among employees. In contrast, Usha (2014) found that "rewards and incentives are the most favorable factors for the motivation of an employee. Similarly, Ishtiaq and Sadia (2017) viewed the reward system and employee satisfaction to be interrelated components because; the reward system improves the employee's job satisfaction and motivation level. This coheres with Danish and Usman's (2010) claims that reward system contributes to keeping employee's unbroken self-esteem level and passionate and happy employees could create happy customers (Bowenard, 2004).

Concept of Customer Loyalty

Khan (2013) citing Bagdonienė and Jakštaitė (2007) established that customer loyalty is the highest valuable result of marketing efforts, thus the improvement on customer loyalty has become an imperative focus of achievement for every organization. It is a win-win relationship for both the organization and the customer (Khan, 2013) if the organization can win the confidence of the customer through its product offering and service delivery quality. Customers exhibit their loyalty through certain behaviors (like resisting offers from the competition, sticking with the firm, recommending the organization and its offerings to others, and working with the organization when they experience a service breakdown) that benefit organizations in terms of reputation and improved revenue (AchieveGlobal, 2008). Besides, the organization also benefits in terms of lower price sensitivity (Khan, 2013) and reduced expenditure on attracting new customers. This gives credence to why customer loyalty has been one of the most recurrent topics of investigation (Didia & Idenedo, 2017; Adepoju & Suraju 2012) with regards to how firms can improve their performance to gain a sustainable prime place in a competitive space. This is also reflected in business mechanisms such as Rewards System, as managers increasingly recognize the imperative of customer loyalty (Didia & Idenedo, 2017).

Customer loyalty is not won by chance; research has it that, it is a function of satisfying customer's expectations because customers compare their subjective perceptions after purchasing a product/service with their expectations before the purchase decision (AchieveGlobal, 2008; Kotler, Keller, 2008; Khan, 2013). This comparison according to Kotler and Keller (2008) leads to a situation of satisfaction if satisfaction exceeds expectations (customer enthusiasm). Though, the nexus between customer satisfaction and its loyalty is not unswervingly comparative because the evaluation of satisfaction relative to the performance of the service provider or product offered differs with customers (Kotler & Keller, 2008). This implied that customers can be satisfied but for different reasons.

Customer loyalty as asserted by Bruhn (2001) is part of a cause-effect sequence that involves processes from the initial contact with the client to the economic success of the organization. According to Bruhn (2001), the stages begin with the customer's first contact with the tendered by the purchase of a product or service, compare previous expectations with the product or service, and assess the level of satisfaction. If the customer's assessment is favorable or customer expectations have been exceeded, customer loyalty will be triggered and that will build his/her trust for the organization's offerings and wiliness to patronize the same product/service in the future. The mentioned sequences transpire into loyalty when this purchasing conviction becomes repeated purchase and the product or service is being recommended to other potential customers and end when it has resulted in the economic success of the enterprise (Bruhn, 2001).

Similarly, Daffy (2009) stressed that customer loyalty does not result from strategies implemented by organizations or customer clubs rather through a good understanding of customers' needs and behavior. As such, he defined loyalty as a physical and emotional commitment given by customers in exchange for meeting their expectations. Budică and Barbu (2010) explained the emotion mentioned in Daffy's (2009) definition of loyalty as the positive or negative feelings brought to mind by an object or idea.

Customer loyalty is customers' predisposition to prefer one brand and its products over those of the competitors, based on the satisfaction they derive from using the brand's products (Didia & Idenedo, 2017) or other psychological, economic, or social reasons. Customer loyalty encourages consumers to shop more frequently, consistently, and often inform increase in volume or value of purchases (Sima & Elham, 2015). Customer loyalty is the willingness of customers to purchase the company's products, instead of those of competing brands; and maintain a profitable relationship with the preferred brand (Kendal, 2012; Mohammad et al., 2012; Inamullah, 2012). This implies that there must be something attractive in a brand that motivates a customer to be consistent with the purchase of the brand's product over time without shifting to competing brands (Mohammad et al., 2012). Loyalty is, therefore, the result of customers' past positive experiences with the brand. Customers return to a company for further business based on these positive experiences; regardless of whether the firm has the best product, price, or service delivery (Singh & Khan, 2012; Ghavami & Olyaei, 2006).

Apart from the result of customers' past positive experiences with the brand as asserted by Singh and Khan (2012) and Ghavami and Olyaei (2006) as a possible function of customer loyalty, Daffy (2009) established an equation (Loyalty = Satisfaction + Affinity + Involvement) to explain loyalty. Daffy (2009) explained further that, to gain customer loyalty, an organization should make sure its products or services meet and exceed customer expectations. By involvement, Daffy implies a relationship between the organization and the customer that will enhance their decision quality based on feedback from customers while affinity occurs when there is satisfaction and involvement. Daffy's loyalty equation was the premise on the notion that an increase in customer loyalty is possible if all resources and processes are focused on customers' needs and expectations and involving them in the process of discovering their needs and desires makes them feel appreciated (Kotler & Keller, 2009).

Customer loyalty is behavioral and attitudinal (Inamullah, 2012) and often a combination of (Ebenuwa & Otite, 2019 citing Bowen & Chen, 2001) both known as composite loyalty for which each broad measure has sub-measures. Customers exhibit behavioral loyalty by willingly repeating patronage and maintaining relationships with the organization, the attitudinal loyalty is expressed through an exhibition of positive feelings about the organization and its offering and voluntarily telling others about the organization and its offerings (Ebenuwa & Otite, 2019) while the composite measures capture elements of both behavioral and attitudinal measures (Bowen & Chen, 2001). Butcher et al. (2001) identify repeat purchase, positive word-of-mouth, resistance to switching, and brand preference as dimensions of loyalty that cut across the behavioral, attitudinal, and composite dimensions of loyalty. This study thus adapts resistance to switching, repeat patronage, and positive word of mouth as measures of customer loyalty.

Resistance to Switching: Resistance to switching is considered as customers' attitudinal expression of loyalty to an organization's brand or services (Butcher et al., 2001; Cronin & Taylor, 1992). Conventionally, customers tend to switch amongst similar brands or services when their perceptions do not match with their expectations in terms of quality, availability, and the price tag for a service (Sirius, 2009). Besides, attractive promotional offers of other brands such as attractive gifts or discounts could also encourage trying another brand (Shahpar, 2014).
Conversely, Reichheld (1996) as cited in Rahim et al. (2012) posits that unsatisfied customers may choose not to switch, because they do not expect to receive better service elsewhere or if the switching cost is high and satisfied customers may seek for competitors because they believe they might receive better service elsewhere. This implies that there is another factor that triggered resistance to switching behavior other than satisfaction with services experienced as compared with expectations. Given that, some marketing scholars (Rahim et al., 2012; Lopez et al., 2008; Watson et al., 2002) considered customers resistance to switching not just an indication of being satisfied with an organizations' brand or services but also a function of the switching decision which includes; the cost of the decision, the perceived benefits of any such decision, and a customer's relative assessment of other factors. The switching costs according to Nicolas et al. (2018) include financial and search effort costs. These switching costs are barriers to switching and they act as factors that make it difficult and costly for consumers to change service providers (Nicolas et al., 2018; Jones et al., 2000).

Customers switching amongst similar brands or services could be triggered by certain events of times and market disruptions. Son et al. (2010) defined market disruptions as major events occurring in the market that threaten customers' loyalty or relationship with a brand. According to Son et al. (2010), the events are not individual firm service failures rather; they include aggressive competitors' sales promotion, industry crises, product recalls, negative publicity, and disruptive innovations by competitors that can influence the relative standing of brands in the eyes of customers. As such, customer resistance to switching even at invents of time and market disruptions are an exhibition of loyalty to an organizations' brand or services.

Repeat Patronage: Repeat patronage is a behavioral (Butcher et al., 2001) demonstration of loyalty by customers through repetitive patronage of a preferred brand or service amidst competitors as a result of being consistently satisfied psychologically, economically, socially, emotionally, physically, and intellectually (Nwulu & Asiegbu, 2015) with the brand or service experienced. Considering the healthcare firms, patients will usually repeat patronage of healthcare services when their service experience exceeds their expectations. Patients would not mind resisting events of times and market disruptions if their service experience with a particular healthcare firm is consistently exceeding their expectation of service economically, psychologically, and physically.

As described by Kumar (2016) cited in Nwadike et al. (2020), repeat patronage is behavior in which customers frequently patronize a product and service of a particular company without considering the products and services offered by other competing organizations. This coheres with Panda's (2013) assertion that, repeat patronage is a behavior whereby consumers repeatedly purchase their needs from a particular company even though there are other companies rendering the same services. Similarly, Curtis et al. (2011) defined repeat patronage as a consumer's actual behavior resulting in the purchase of the same product or service on more than one occasion. Nwulu and Asiegbu (2015) considered repeat patronage as a measure of loyalty to a brand by consumers. Based on their analysis, higher repeat patronage value means a well retained and satisfied customer and thus recommend service providers to take some actions to ensure repeat patronage of their services by listening to customer comments, suggestions, feedback, complaints, about the services they are offering and providing value-adding services to the customer experience.

Word-of-Mouth: Delighted and loyal customers consciously and unconsciously exhibit loyalty behaviourally by willingly repeating patronage and maintaining relationships with the organization and attitudinally through an exhibition of positive feelings about the organization and its offering and voluntarily telling others about the organization and its offerings (Ebenuwa & Otite, 2019). Positive word-of-mouth is indirect marketing through a satisfied and loyal customer by making strong recommendations and praises about a brand or its products to potential consumers (Susanta et al., 2013) and because potential customers see information from friends or even strangers as more unbiased and reliable than those of an economic entity (Brown & Peter, 1987), it is thus acknowledged by academics and business practitioners as one of the reasons customer loyalty is believed to be invaluable (Didia & Idenedo, 2017; Peter et al., 2013). Susanta et al. (2013) as cited in Didia and Idenedo (2017) dramatized the imperative of positive word-of-mouth by stating that, increasing loyalty is achieved by maintaining customers while an increase in market share is achieved through positive word-of-mouth.

Empirical literature gave credence that, positive word-of-mouth enhances companies' ability to acquire new customers and maintain the loyalty of existing ones (Alhulail et al., 2018; Peter et al., 2013) hence; it is considered as one of the strongest marketing techniques. Muhammed and Peter (2019) in a study on word of mouth communication: a mediator of relationship marketing and customer loyalty found a significant positive association between the word of mouth and customer loyalty. Peter et al. (2013) established that positive word-of-mouth has a direct association with customers' repeated purchase behavior which indicates consumer loyalty.

Similarly, Brown et al. (2005) study on word-of-mouth facets in eateries established that there is a substantial link between word-of-mouth and customer loyalty and added that the effect of positive or negative word-of-mouth on customer loyalty differs significantly from industry to industry; while Liyander and Stradvick (1995) advocated the imperative of positive word-of-mouth for brand success because it removes qualms and convinces potential customers. Word-of-mouth is said to (Didia & Idenedo, 2017) serve as a switching barrier by influencing customer excitement and blocking customers from breaking the connection even when inconsistencies are observed in the firm's service delivery and boosts customer confidence in the company, its services and makes customers feel they made the right choice (Muhammed & Peter, 2019).

Premised on the few cited empirical test postulation on the link between word-of-mouth and customer loyalty, it is deducible that, adequately satisfied customers will likely talk about their experience with the brand and possibly recommend it to friends and family which cohere with Mohammad et al. (2013) assertion that, if customers are satisfied, they will increase the volume or value of their purchases, and also tell others about their pleasurable experience with the brand. Since the most valuable asset of any company is its customer-ship (Ateke & Harcourt, 2017), and the survival of any business depends on customer satisfaction and loyalty, it will be an idea for healthcare companies in Nigeria specifically federal tertiary healthcare in South-South Nigeria to improve on their service delivery quality that will bring about positive customer experience, gain their positive word-of-mouth marketing and other loyalty behavior and attitudes.

Contact Employee Reward System and Customers Loyalty

A proper reward system in healthcare firms is expected to elicit customers loyalty based on the extant literature reviewed. For instance, Walters et al. (2019) investigated the effect of a reward system on employee performance in selected manufacturing firms in the Littoral Region of Cameroon. A sample of 538 employees was drawn from a population of 5146 employees of ten selected manufacturing firms within the Cameroon Littoral Region. The findings revealed that the predictor variables significantly relate to the study's criterion variables. The study concluded that there is a positive link between reward systems and employee performance. Based on the findings, it was recommended amongst others that reward systems for manufacturing firms should be designed such that employees are entitled to percentages of profit earned by the firm as a means of promoting productivity and group cohesiveness amongst employees.

Ishtiaq and Sadia (2017) examined the relationship between the rewards system and employee performance of private banks in Pakistan. A sample of 92 respondents in three districts (Lodhran, Vehari, Khanewal) of south Punjab, Pakistan was taken from HBL, ABL, MCB, UBL, and BOP banks. A structured Likert Scale format questionnaire was used for data collection. Regression was used to analyze the collected data. The result of this study reveals that there is the presence of a relationship between intrinsic and extrinsic rewards on employee performance and has a significant effect of intrinsic and extrinsic rewards difference on employee performance of the banking sector in Pakistan.

Salah (2016) examined the influence of reward types (extrinsic, intrinsic, social, and rewards mix) on employee performance. Data was collected from 250 sampled respondents of the population of 513 people working for Unified Mining Companies located in the southern part of Jordan. The findings indicated that there is a statistically significant relationship between rewards types and employees performance. The study concluded that management should have a deep sense of commitment towards the issue of rewarding employees if performance levels are to be enhanced.

Vera and Peter (2015) explored the impact of reward and recognition on job satisfaction and motivation. The study employed a descriptive survey design in gathering data from 157 academic staff, from a total number of seven private tertiary institutions which were selected through stratified sampling. Respondents from these seven private tertiary institutions were conveniently and purposively selected. The study observed that rewards had a positive impact on work motivation but no significant relationship existed between reward and job satisfaction. Again, both academic staff and university administrators perceived rewards as fair.

Nnaji-Ihedinmah and Egbunike (2015) determined the relationship between the rewards system and employee performance. A questionnaire designed in the Likert-scale format was administered to employees of commercial banks in Awka Metropolis. The data were analyzed with regression technique and two-way ANOVA. The findings revealed that there is a relationship between rewards and employee performance. Also, there is a significant difference in the effects of intrinsic and extrinsic rewards on employee performance.

Serena et al. (2012) examined the relationship between rewards and employee performance as well identified the relationship between extrinsic and intrinsic rewards. Data were collected from 180 sampled employees of the commercial bank. The result indicates that there is a statistically significant relationship between all of the independent variables with dependent variables employee work performance and all the independent variables that have a positive influence on employee work performance.

Based on the above extant literature, the current study hypothesized that:
Ho_1: Contact employees reward system and customers resistance to switching have no significant relationship.
Ho_2: Contact employees reward system and customers repeat patronage has no significant association.
Ho_3: Contact employees reward system and customers word of mouth have no significant association.

The operational conceptual framework below exhibits the assumption this study is built on.

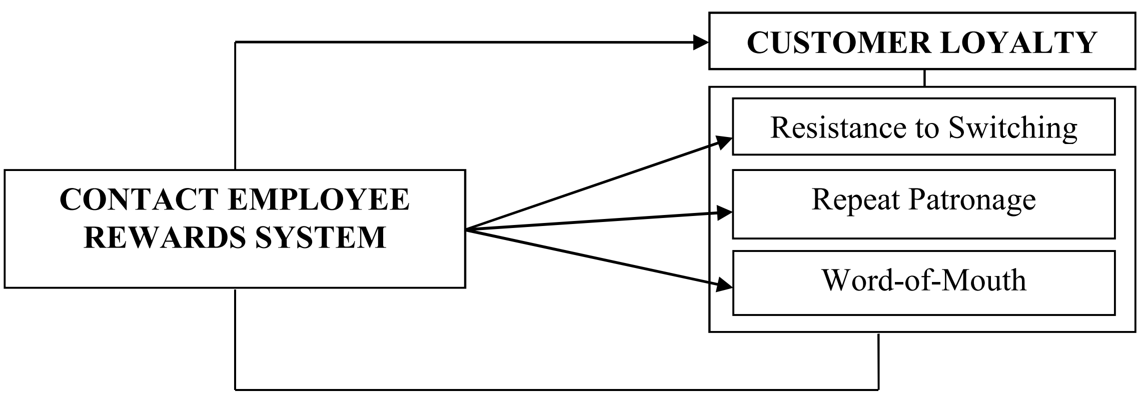

Figure 1: Operational Conceptual Framework of Contact Employee Rewards System and Customers Loyalty
Source: The study the measures were adapted from Butcher *et al*. (2001).

METHODOLOGY

This study aimed to examine the correlation between the contact employee rewards system and customer loyalty of healthcare firms in South-South, Nigeria. The study adopted an explanatory research design. The population of this study comprised federal tertiary healthcare providers specifically in South-South, Nigeria, and all in-patients admitted into each of the teaching hospitals. This study was directed at the teaching hospitals because they provide the widest admittance to patients with the completeness of all cadres of healthcare workers. Based on information obtained from the Federal Ministry of Health, December 2020, there are currently four (4) approved university-based federal tertiary healthcare providers in South-South, Nigeria. Namely: University of Port Harcourt Teaching Hospital with staff strength of 2500 and 800 beds space for patients. This information was obtained from info@upth.com; the University of Benin Teaching Hospital has a staff strength of 3,840 and 850 beds space for patients. This information was obtained from info@ubth.com, University of Calabar Teaching Hospital with staff strength of 2,946 and 415 beds space for patients, and this information was obtained from info@ucth.com and University of Uyo Teaching Hospital with staff strength of 2000 and 500-bed spaces for patients and this information was obtained from info@uuth.com. In determining the sample size for this study, a census was taken for the current study. Eighteen (18) different contact employees and five (5) in-patients of each of the federal university teaching hospitals in South-South, Nigeria formed the study's sample unit, thereby making a total of ninety-eight (98) respondents that participated in this study. The table below exhibits the breakdown of the sampled respondents.

Table 1: Categories of Respondents

S/N	Categories Of Staff Sampled	UPTH	UCTH	UBTH	UUTH
1	Nurse	2	2	2	2
2	Administration	2	2	2	2
3	Doctor	2	2	2	2
4	Lab scientist	2	2	2	2
5	Pharmacist	2	2	2	2
6	Health assistant	2	2	2	2
7	Paramedic	2	2	2	2
8	Physiotherapy	2	2	2	2
9	Optometry	2	2	2	2
	Total Sampled	**18 Staff**	**18 Staff**	**18 Staff**	**18 Staff**

S/N	Patients Sampled	UPTH	UCTH	UBTH	UUTH
1	In-Patients	5	5	5	5
	Total Sampled	**5 In-Patients**	**5 In-Patients**	**5 In-Patients**	**5 In-Patients**

These categories of employees were used for this study because they constitute service contacts of each of the federal universities teaching hospitals in South-South, Nigeria. In healthcare, patients often interact with contact employees (nurse, administration, doctor, lab scientist, pharmacist, health assistant, paramedic, physiotherapy, optometry, etc.) whose role is an ingredient of differentiation. Contact employees could influence service quality perception of the patient through their attitude and service delivery while five in-patients were considered enough to provide the necessary information needed for the study.

The questionnaire was utilized as the instrument of primary data collection. Respondents were required to tick from 1-5 on a Likert scale, where 1= strongly disagree; 2= disagree; 3= neutral; 4= agree; 5= strongly agree. To justify the study instrument, a comprehensive reliability test was conducted, with a threshold of 0.7 set by Nunnally (1978); while the opinion of scholars and practitioners with relevant experience on the study constructs was used to validate the instrument. Table 1 below displays the summary of the test of reliability.

Table 2: Result of Reliability Analysis

Variables	Dimensions/Measures	No. Items	Cronbach's Alpha
Rewards System	Rewards System	5	0.967
	Resistance to Switching	5	0.844
Customers Loyalty	Repeat Patronage	5	0.842
	Word of Mouth	5	0.935

Source: SPSS Output of Data Analysis on Rewards System and Customers Loyalty (2020).

DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULT

Table 3: Questionnaire Analysis

Numbers	Questionnaire	Percent
No. Sent out	98	100.0
No. Returned	85	87.0
No. Not Returned	13	13.0

Source: Field Survey Data 2020

Table 3 shows that a total of 98 copies of the questionnaire were distributed, out of which 85 representing (87%) were retrieved while 13 representing (13%) were not retrieved. However, 85 representing (85%) of the retrieved questionnaire were useful. The 13 (13%) of the not retrieved questionnaire were not correctly filled and were consequently discarded.

Having analyzed the questionnaire, the various hypotheses proposed for this study were subjected to statistical tests using the Spearman's Rank Order Correlation Co-Efficient Statistical Tool.

Table 4: Description of the Degree of Association between Variables

Correlation Coefficient (r)	Description/Interpretation
± 0.80 – 1.0	Very Strong
± 0.60 – 0.79	Strong
± 0.40 – 0.59	Moderate
± 0.20 – 0.39	Weak
± 0.00 – 0.19	Very Weak

Source: SPSS Output of Data Analysis on Rewards System and Customers Loyalty (2020).

The positive (+) sign in the value of r indicates a direct/positive relationship while the negative (-) sign in value of r indicates an indirect/negative or inverse relationship. Therefore, the sign of the r-value explains the direction of association or nature of the relationship between the variables.

Decision Rule

Reject the null hypothesis (H0) if PV < 0.05 for the 2-tailed test and conclude that a significant relationship exists.

Table 5: Correlation Analysis on Rewards System and Resistance to Switching

Correlations

			Rewards System	Resistance to Switching
Spearman's rho	Rewards System	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.718**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.000
		N	85	85
	Resistance to Switching	Correlation Coefficient	.718**	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.
		N	85	85

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).
Source: SPSS Output of Data Analysis on Contact Employee Rewards System and Customers Loyalty (2020)

Table 5 explains that Spearman's correlation coefficient (r) = 0.718**, this value is high; implying that a strong relationship exists rewards system and resistance to switching. The positive sign of the correlation coefficient connotes positive relationships that exist between variables, indicating that, an increase in customers (patients) resistance to switching is associated with the level of satisfaction derived by the service contacts of the studied healthcare provider firms through the firms' rewards system. The probability value is (0.000) < (0.05) level of significance; hence the researcher rejects the null hypothesis and concludes that, contact employees' reward system and customers' resistance to switching significantly relate.

Table 6: Correlation Analysis on Rewards System and Repeat Patronage

Correlations

			Rewards System	Repeat Patronage
Spearman's rho	Rewards System	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.656**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.000
		N	85	85
	Repeat Patronage	Correlation Coefficient	.656**	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.
		N	85	85

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).
Source: SPSS Output of Data Analysis on Rewards System and Customers Loyalty (2020)

Table 6 above shows that Spearman's correlation coefficient (r) = 0.656**, this value is high, implies that a strong relationship exists rewards system and repeat patronage. The positive sign of the correlation coefficient denotes positive relationships that exist between the variables which also mean that an increase in repeat patronage of customers is associated with the level of satisfaction derived by the service contacts of the studied healthcare provider firms through the firms' contact employee rewards system. The probability value is (0.000) < (0.05) level of significance; hence the researcher rejects the null hypothesis and concludes that there is a significant relationship between contact employee rewards system and repeat patronage.

Table 7: Correlation Analysis on Rewards System and Word of Mouth

Correlations

			Rewards System	Word of Mouth
Spearman's rho	Rewards System	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.724**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.000
		N	85	85
	Word of Mouth	Correlation Coefficient	.724**	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.
		N	85	85

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).
Source: SPSS Output of Data Analysis on Rewards System and Customers Loyalty (2020)

Table 7 explains that Spearman's correlation coefficient (r) = 0.724**, this value is high, implies that a strong relationship exists between contact employee rewards system and word of mouth. The positive sign of the correlation coefficient signified that a positive relationship exists between variables which also mean that, an increase in customers' positive word of mouth is a function of the level of satisfaction derived by the service contacts of the studied healthcare provider firms through the firms' contact employees’ rewards system. The probability value is (0.000) < (0.05) level of significance; hence the researcher rejects the null hypothesis and concludes that there is a significant relationship between contact employees' rewards system and customers' word of mouth.

Discussion of Findings

Strong Positive Relationship between Contact Employee Rewards System and Customers Loyalty

The tested hypotheses on the link between contact employees reward system and measures of customers' loyalty show that contact employees reward system and customers resistances significantly relate. Contact employees reward system and customers repeat patronages significantly relate. Contact employees reward system and customers word of mouth significantly relate. As demonstrated in Table 5, Spearman's correlation coefficient (r) = 0.718**, this value is high; implying that a strong relationship exists rewards system and resistance to switching. In Table 6, Spearman's correlation coefficient (r) = 0.656**, this value is high, implies that a strong relationship exists contact employee rewards system and repeat patronage. Also, in Table 7 Spearman's correlation coefficient (r) = 0.724**, this value is high, implying that a strong relationship exists between contact employee rewards system and word of mouth. These findings concur with previous studies' findings, for instance, Walters, Bamidele et al. (2019) investigated the effect of reward systems on employee performance in selected manufacturing firms in the Littoral Region of Cameroon. The findings revealed that the predictor variables significantly relate to the study's criterion variables. Ishtiaq and Sadia (2017) examined the relationship between the rewards system and employee performance of private banks in Pakistan. The result of this study reveals that there is the presence of a relationship between intrinsic and extrinsic rewards on employee performance and has a significant effect of intrinsic and extrinsic rewards difference on employee performance of the banking sector in Pakistan. Salah (2016) examined the influence of reward types (extrinsic, intrinsic, social, and rewards mix) on employee performance. The findings indicated that there is a statistically significant relationship between rewards types and employees performance. Vera and Peter (2015) explored the impact of reward and recognition on job satisfaction and motivation. The study observed that rewards had a positive impact on work motivation but no significant relationship existed between reward and job satisfaction. Again, both academic staff and university administrators perceived rewards as fair. Nnaji-Ihedinmah and Egbunike (2015) determined the relationship between the rewards system and employee performance. The findings revealed that there is a relationship between rewards and employee performance. Also, there is a significant difference in the effects of intrinsic and extrinsic rewards on employee performance. Also, Serena et al. (2012) examined the relationship between rewards and employee performance as well identified the relationship between extrinsic and intrinsic rewards. The result indicates that there is a statistically significant relationship between all of the independent variables with dependent variables employee work performance and all the independent variables that have a positive influence on employee work performance.

CONCLUSION(S) AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Derived from the findings, the study, therefore, concludes that contact employee rewards system significantly relates to customers loyalty and customers loyalty expressed as resistance to switching, repeat patronage and word of mouth is a function of contact employee's rewards system of the healthcare providers. As such, the study recommends that the healthcare firms that seek to improve customers' loyalty should consider an attractive contact employee rewards system as an essential mechanism and the healthcare firms should consider appropriate contact employee rewards system as an imperative strategy to improve on customers' resistance to switching behavior, repeat patronage and positive word of mouth.

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