



Internal Marketing Practices and Customer Loyalty of Healthcare Firms in South-South, Nigeria

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Abstract: *This study examined internal marketing practices 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. Spearman's Rank Order Correlation served as the test statistic relying on SPSS version 21.0. The study observed a significant relationship between internal marketing and customer loyalty. Premised on the finding, the study, conclude that there is a significant relationship between internal marketing practices and customer loyalty. Thus, the study recommendations that healthcare firms that seek to improve customer loyalty should consider internal marketing practices as a strategy.*

Keywords: *Internal Marketing Practices and Customer Loyalty*

INTRODUCTION

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 (Idenedo & Eбенуwa, 2022; Idenedo & Goodie, 2022). 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 the quality or absence of internal marketing practices among healthcare providers (Idenedo & Ebenuwa, 2022).

Marketing indigenes use internal marketing with other ingredients of marketing strategies to improve customer loyalty and achieve competitive advantage; using different working systems that include employee involvement and participation in various business processes and activities (Mohammed et al., 2016). This implies that internal marketing is a strategy that requires investing in the organization's employees to improve job satisfaction and elicit commitment; both of which are deemed precursors of import to company performance (Bowen & Schneider, 2014). 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 (Bellaouaied & Gam, 2012), as such, they need to be well-trained on better ways to outsell their competitors through service delivery, product knowledge, and also be motivated to assist customers. Internal marketing practices in the healthcare sector create a positive work environment that results in the provision of higher quality care and concentrate on transforming promises made by service providers and their skills into highly efficient work performance that delights customers (Shekoofeh et al., 2019; Mazen et al., 2018).

Several scholars have examined the practice of internal marketing in healthcare but none of these studies related the concept to customer loyalty specifically. For instance, Efthymios and Constantinos-Vasilios (2011) carried out a pilot study in public hospitals in Northern Greece to determine the effect of internal marketing on job satisfaction in health services. Daniela et al. (2012) explored internal marketing in Portuguese healthcare. Mazen et al. (2018) identified the impact of factors affecting internal marketing on the quality of health services provided by the public hospitals in Amman. Nestor et al. (2018) incorporated the mediating role of key job characteristics to explore the nexus between internal marketing in hospitals and organizational commitment. Shekoofeh et al. (2019) investigated the internal marketing activities in educational hospitals of Yazd, Iran. Besides, most of the studies conducted on internal marketing practices and other constructs in healthcare firms were not conducted in Nigeria. Premised on the stated observations, this study therefore examined the interplay between internal marketing practices and customer loyalty of healthcare firms in South-South Nigeria.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Foundation

This study on the interaction between internal marketing practices and customer loyalty of healthcare firms in South-South Nigeria is premised on the resource-based theory.

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) are "all assets, capabilities, organizational processes, firm attributes, information, and 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 is 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 and utilize their capabilities in providing excellent customer service that in turn builds on the healthcare's reputation. This study proposed that contact employee motivation through internal marketing practices will contribute to their job satisfaction and in turn enhance their service quality delivery to the customers premise on the notion that, satisfied and loyal customers will express their loyalty through repeat patronage, resistance to switching and positive word of mouth (Butcher et al., 2001).

Concept of Internal Marketing Practices

Internal marketing as a concept came into light in service marketing literature through the work of Berry et al. (1976) and Berry and Parasuraman (1992). In their work, emphasis was placed on employees as internal customers, their jobs as products, and the committed products were expected to satisfy the value requirement of the internal customer (Soheila et al., 2019). As such, internal marketing has been regarded as a service marketing instrument, a competitive strategy (Gounaris 2005) that motivates employees to work towards achieving organizational goals (Mohamed et al., 2002). The change in service quality and attitudinal change of customer-facing staff as observed by Papasolomou and Kitchen (2004), would equip the organization to effectively compete in the competitive space which was the focal purpose for the launch of internal marketing within the healthcare sector (Abbas & Riaz, 2018).

Internal marketing as opined by Ahmed and Rafiq (2003) provides a comprehensible indication that the organization values its employees, and that building employee commitment requires the organization to understand its employee's needs and satisfy them. The assertion that "organizations should endeavor to deduce and apparently understand its employee's needs and satisfy them profitably entails a culture of customer orientation (Sasser & Arbeit, 1976; Ahmed & Rafiq, 2000; Ahmed & Rafiq, 2003; Ferdous & Polonsky, 2014) strategic implementation and change in management to achieve organization goals (Gronroos, 1981; Winter, 1985). However, the current study is anchored in the belief that internal marketing practices would lead to external customer loyalty among healthcare firms in South-South Nigeria.

Concept of Customer Loyalty

Bagdonienė and Jakštaitė (2007, as cited in Khan, 2013) established that customer loyalty is the highest valuable result of marketing efforts, thus the improvement of 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 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 practices such as internal marketing practices, 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 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 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.

Similarly, Daffy (2009) stressed that customer loyalty does not result from strategies implemented by an organization or customer club but 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; Idenedo & Eбенуwa, 2022; Idenedo & Goodie-Okio, 2022) 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 to 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 ($\text{Loyalty} = \text{Satisfaction} + \text{Affinity} + \text{Involvement}$) 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 premised 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, 2008).

Empirical Review

There are different views on what constitutes internal marketing by different scholars from different socio-cultural backgrounds with different industrial studies considering it from the earliest studies. Berry (1981) decomposed internal marketing using the application of marketing techniques, attracting and retaining employees, participative employee (participative management), and tasks as products (work importance). Grönroos (1981) looked at it in terms of attracting and retaining employees, participative employee (participative management), empowerment, teaching, and sharing information and tasks as products (work importance) were considered as dimensions of internal marketing mechanism. Tansuhaj et al. (1987) conceptualized the concept with attract and retaining employees, teaching, sharing information, and job satisfaction. Rafiq and Ahmed (2000) used empowerment and job

satisfaction. Bansal et al. (2001) adapted empowerment, teaching, shared information, recognition, job security, and job satisfaction. Ahmed et al. (2003) utilized the application of marketing techniques/tools, empowerment, and recognition as dimensions. Virtually all recent studies based on empirical literature reviewed and adapted one or two of the stated (Bohnenberger et al., 2019) authors and dimensions. For instance;

Colette et al. (2020) explored the effect of internal marketing on customer satisfaction in second-tier microfinance institutions in Cameroon. The study's dimensions of internal marketing were vision, reward, and training/development. Data was collected from 372 customers and 60 employees of second-tier microfinance institutions in Cameroon. The results indicate that two dimensions of internal marketing (rewards and training/development) have a positive and significant effect on customer satisfaction. The effect of vision on customer satisfaction is positive but non-significant.

Soheila et al. (2019) investigated the mediation effect of motivation (MO) between internal marketing and service innovation using a hierarchical model in Bahman Group Corp of the automobile industry in Iran. Internal marketing was studied through empowerment, strategic reward and intensive system, training and development, internal communication, operation process, and senior leadership. Data were collected through a questionnaire from 177 employees of Bahman Group Corp and analyzed using partial least squares (PLS) with confirmatory factor analysis to test the hypotheses with the aid of Software SmartPLS 3.2. The results indicate that motivation has a partial mediation effect between internal marketing and service innovation. This study illustrates that internal communication and a new organizational delivery system have the most substantial effect on internal marketing and service innovation.

Yu-Ting et al. (2019) studied the relationship between internal marketing practice and employee satisfaction in a budget Chinese airline setting. The dimensions of internal marketing considered in the study were: internal communication, training, and internal marketing research. Data were collected through a questionnaire from 252 flight attendants and the data were analyzed using structural equation modeling. The results showed that internal marketing practice through internal communication, training and internal marketing research impacted significantly on employee's satisfaction with the budget airline.

Farhad et al. (2018) explore the impact of internal marketing on customer loyalty of Iran Insurance Company - Kermanshah province mediated with marketing mix; price product, place, and distribution. Data for the study were obtained through a questionnaire and the hypotheses were analyzed and tested using structural equation modeling and especially path analysis. The study revealed that internal marketing through the marketing mix and customer satisfaction has influenced customer loyalty.

Md. and Dewan (2018) analyzed the relationship between internal marketing factors and employee job satisfaction in the retail sector of Bangladesh. The internal marketing components adapted for the study were: training and development, organizational support,

pay and rewards, and retention policy. Data was collected through a questionnaire from 250 employees from the retail sector and the data were analyzed with multiple regression analysis. The results showed that there is variation in the effect of internal marketing elements on job satisfaction.

Rana and Muhammad (2018) examined the effect of internal marketing on the organizational commitment of employees in private banks of Faisalabad. A model was made to examine the factors affecting organizational commitment and it was tested empirically using a sample of 109 employees of different private banks working at different ranks. Data were collected through questionnaire descriptive statistics and regression was used to analyze the data. It was found that job satisfaction, understanding, differentiation, and inter-functional coordination and integration are the most effective components of the internal marketing construct of the research model, making them key influencers of organizational commitment.

João et al. (2018) determined the internal marketing and organizational performance of SMEs in the EDV industrial sector of the Portuguese region between rivers Douro and Vouga. The research identified conditions for the implementation of internal marketing concepts among employees and their impact on organizational performance. Data were collected through recording and in-depth interviews based on a script of generally open questions to the entire industry in the Portuguese region between rivers Douro and Vouga and analyzed statistically. The results showed the awareness of the internal marketing conceptualization in the studied sector. The research likewise showed that all analyzed enterprises had more or less structured model frames and worked with the conceptualization of the guidance for the internal market, a strategic concern, and in some instances, this concept was an organizational desideratum in the sector.

Maryam et al. (2018) determined the effects of internal marketing on the satisfaction of employees and employee word of mouth in Saderat Bank of Iran in Gulian. The study adapted reward, empowerment, training, communication, and supervisor support as dimensions of internal marketing. Structural Equation Modeling was used to analyze the study's data. The study revealed a significant relationship between internal marketing (reward, empowerment, training, communication, and supervisor support), the satisfaction of employees, and employee word of mouth.

Nestor et al. (2018) assessed the effect of internal marketing on the organizational commitment of health workers, with the mediating roles of salient job characteristics in this relationship evaluated. Data were collected through a questionnaire from 717 health workers who met some selection criteria and the data were analyzed and hypotheses were tested using confirmatory factor analysis. Findings showed that internal marketing makes a significant positive effect on the commitment of health workers. It also has a positive effect on job tenure, which means that internal marketing enables employees to increase job security and spend more years on the job. Tenure makes a negative effect on organizational commitment, possibly owing to the confounding variables captured and/or the fact that employees tend to expect too

much from their employers as their experience and tenure increase. Income makes a positive effect on organizational commitment, which suggests that health workers get more committed to patient care when their job income increases.

Baran and Arabelen (2017) researched the effects of internal marketing activities (development, vision and communication, and reward system) on employees' job satisfaction of container line ship agents in İzmir. Data were collected through a questionnaire from 143 employees of container line ship agents in İzmir and the data were analyzed through regression analysis with aid of SPSS version 20 software. The research findings showed that internal marketing (development, vision and communication, and reward system) has a positive effect on the job satisfaction of the office employees of container line ship agents in İzmir.

Nebo and Okechukwu (2017) studied the moderating impact of personality and job satisfaction on the influence of internal marketing on customer orientation behavior of Hotel Employees in Nigeria. The internal marketing components or practices adapted for the study were: training and development; reward and recognition; internal communication and empowerment. Data were collected through questionnaires from 83 and 174 hotel managers and employees of 20 hotels operating in different geo-political zones of Nigeria and the hypotheses were tested using multiple linear regression. It was shown that internal marketing has a significant influence on customer orientation behavior of hotels' employees; personality significantly moderates the relationship between internal marketing and customer orientation behavior of the hotel employees; job satisfaction significantly moderates the relationship between internal marketing and customer orientation behavior of the hotels' employees.

Qureshi (2017) analyzed the impact of internal marketing on employees' job satisfaction and consumer satisfaction based on a survey of four major private banks in Srinagar, Jammu, and Kashmir. The study's internal marketing dimensions were employees' development, employees' motivation, and reward. Data were collected through questionnaires and the data were analyzed using one-sample statistics and Pearson Correlation. The study indicates a positive relationship between internal marketing (employees' development, employees' motivation, and reward), employee satisfaction, and consumer satisfaction.

Mengistu (2017) studied the effect of internal marketing on customers' satisfaction in the case of the Commercial Bank of Ethiopia. There study dimensions were: empathy and consideration, benchmarking of the benefits package, job quality and reward, upward communication, value and information sharing, and promotional activities. Data for the study was collected through a questionnaire. The hypotheses were analyzed with Pearson correlation, and multiple linear regressions and the findings revealed a significant effect of internal marketing dimensions on customer satisfaction.

Gafar et al. (2016) investigated the nexus between internal marketing practices and employees' customer orientation in Nigeria's banking sector mediated by personality factors and job satisfaction. The study dimensions were; internal communication, training and development,

employee empowerment, and reward and recognition. Data for the study was obtained through a questionnaire and analyzed using PPMC. The results revealed that internal marketing has a significant relationship with customer orientation while personality trait factors and job satisfaction constructs were found to mediate significantly the influence of internal marketing practices on customer orientation behavior of banking employees in Nigeria.

Waddah and Nooraini (2016) examined the effects of internal marketing on job satisfaction among bank employees in Yemen. The internal marketing dimensions adapted for the study were: development, vision, internal communications, rewards, and empowerment. Data was collected through a questionnaire from 407 Yemeni bank employees and the data was analyzed with the help of descriptive statistics, and exploratory factor analysis. Added to that, the study used structural equation modeling and the findings showed that internal marketing (development, vision, internal communications, rewards, and empowerment) has a significant relationship with job satisfaction in the banking sector in Yemen.

John (2016) studied the influence of internal marketing, moderated by the size of the organization on the performance of NGOs. The study looked at three components namely: employees' recruitment & development, employee relationships, and employees' remuneration and welfare. Data were collected through a semi-structured questionnaire from 122 NGOs operating in Nairobi Kenya. The findings show that there is a statistically significant relationship between the three components of internal marketing and the performance of NGOs. The finding further showed that the relationship between internal marketing practices and the performance of NGOs is not moderated by the size of the organization.

Yahya (2016) ascertained the impact of the application of internal marketing on job satisfaction for the employees in the Islamic bank of Jordan. Internal marketing dimensions adapted for the study were: empowering of employees, training programs, incentives and rewards, and internal communication. Data were collected through a questionnaire from 205 employees and the data were analyzed and the hypotheses tested through regression analysis with the aid of SPSS. The findings showed that there exists a statistically significant impact of three dimensions of internal marketing (training programs, incentives, and rewards, internal communication), on job satisfaction for the employees in Islamic banks.

Mohammed et al. (2016) explored the impact of internal marketing practices on the organizational commitment of the employees of the insurance companies in Jordan, five practices of internal marketing was looked at by the study namely (rewards and incentives, managerial support, internal communication, training programs, and empowerment). Data were collected through a questionnaire from 374 employees of the insurance companies in Jordan and analyzed with regression analysis. The study showed that all internal marketing practices (rewards and incentives, managerial support, internal communication, training programs, and empowerment) have the effect of improving the organizational commitment of staff in the insurance companies in Jordan, and was the highest-dimensional effect in terms of rewards and incentives.

Lydia et al. (2016) investigated the effect of internal marketing strategy on employee performance and the moderating role of employee commitment among selected public universities in Kenya. In the study, internal marketing was dimensioned by information generation, communication/dissemination, and response to internal marketing information. Data were collected through questionnaires from employees from both administrative and academic staff positions and analyzed with descriptive and inferential analyses. Findings reveal that internal marketing strategy significantly influences employee performance; the study also established a significant relationship between employee commitment and employee performance among selected public universities in Kenya. The study however established no significant moderating effect of employee commitment on the relationship between internal marketing strategy and employee performance among selected public universities in Kenya was however established.

Sara and Leila (2015) investigated the effect of internal marketing on customer orientation in the insurance industry of Abadan City, Iran. Data were collected through questionnaires from both employees and customers and the analysis and test of the hypotheses were done using confirmatory factor analysis with the aid of both SPSS and Smart-PLS. The study showed that internal marketing significantly and positively affects organizational commitment. Also, internal marketing significantly and positively affects customer orientation and customer satisfaction.

Javeria and Rashid (2014) examined the impact of internal marketing (empowerment and communication on employee job satisfaction in Businesses in Universities of Pakistan. Data were collected from 116 professionals from the Business Universities of Pakistan through a questionnaire and the data were analyzed using linear multiple regression and mean values. The results showed that overall internal marketing practice has a positive influence on employees' job satisfaction.

Esmaeel et al. (2013) investigated the effect of internal marketing on employees' behavior in private insurance companies in Guilan province. The study's dimensions of internal marketing were job security, extensive training, and generous rewards, sharing of information, employees' empowerment, and reduced status distinctions. Data were collected through a questionnaire from a sample of 115 employees of private insurance companies in Guilan province (Rasht city) and were analyzed through Chi-square with the aid of SPSS. The study showed that there is a positive relationship between the element of internal marketing and internal customers' loyalty (managers' trust and job satisfaction).

Mohammad and Mina (2013) studied the effects of internal marketing on customer-oriented social and pro-social behaviors of hotels in Isfahan city. The study's dimensions were empowerment, service training, and service reward. Data were obtained through questionnaires and analyzed using t-test and regression modeling. The findings supported all research hypotheses and therefore concluded that internal marketing significantly affects customer-oriented pro-social behaviors.

Yu-Chuan and Shinyi (2013) carried out a study on modeling internal marketing and employee loyalty: a quantitative approach. Internal marketing components adapted for the study were: work support, and organizational atmosphere, a communication channel, educational training, motivation, and empowerment. The study developed a structural model and tests it in a hospital to identify how internal marketing quality influences employee organizational loyalty. Data were collected from 240 respondents from a private hospital in Taiwan. All survey information was coded for statistical analyses and entered into a computer database. The data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, factor analysis, and structural equation modeling (SEM). SEM analysis indicated a good fit between the hypothesized model and the sample data. Results showed a significant path coefficient between internal marketing and employee loyalty. The test results showed the strong role of internal marketing on employee loyalty.

Suliman et al. (2013) examined the impact of internal marketing practices represented by the empowerment, training, leadership, and motivation, on job satisfaction of Jordanian commercial banks. Data were collected from 203 employees of commercial banks in Amman. Statistical Package (SPSS) was used to test the hypothesis. Based on the statistical analysis and the values, training and development have the highest impact on employee job satisfaction followed by motivation, empowerment, and communication, respectively. The study thus concluded that there is an effect of internal marketing practices on employees' job satisfaction.

Ogunnaike et al. (2012) determined internal marketing practices and their relationship with job satisfaction in a Nigerian university environment. The dimensions of internal marketing used for the study were: vision, development, and reward. Data were collected through a questionnaire from 230 employees (both academic and non-academic staff) in a Nigerian university and the hypotheses were tested by KMO and Bartlett's test (factor analysis). Results indicated internal marketing as having resultant effects on three major areas or components; understanding of organizational vision and values, quality delivery of external marketing as well as quality delivery of interactive marketing. It was also established that there was a strong and positive relationship between internal marketing and job satisfaction.

Daniel et al. (2012) studied internal marketing in Portuguese Health Care. The study adapted communication, leadership, benchmarking and job quality and promotional activities as dimensions of internal marketing. Data for the study were obtained through a questionnaire from a sample of 234 nurses, 135 from public hospitals using a traditional management model and 99 from long-term care units using a non-traditional management model. The findings indicate that the IMS when used to measure nurses' perceptions of their organizations' internal marketing orientation was reliable. The findings also indicate a relatively low (mean = approximately 3.2 on a 7-point scale) perception of international marketing practices in their sample organization.

Efthymios and Constantinos-Vasilios (2011) studied the effect of internal marketing on job satisfaction in health services, particularly in public hospitals in Northern Greece. Data were collected through questionnaires from three categories of health care professionals, nurses,

doctors, and paramedic personnel working in public hospitals. The findings revealed that doctors tend to be more satisfied with their job than nurses in the same hospitals. Male personnel also tend to be more satisfied with their job than females. Time-defined work contract personnel have a greater level of job satisfaction than permanent personnel. Marital status, position, and educational level have no statistically significant impact on job satisfaction. A slight decline in job satisfaction occurs as the personnel age. The study thus concluded that, internal marketing positively affects the job satisfaction of hospital staff in Northern Greece.

Based on the empirical literature reviewed, the study hypothesized that;

Ho₁: There is no significant relationship between internal marketing practices and customer loyalty.

METHODOLOGY

This study explored the moderating role of industry policy on the interplay between internal marketing practices 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 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 beds 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.

A 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 2 below displays the summary of the test of reliability.

Table 2: Result of Reliability Analysis

Variables	No. Items	Cronbach's Alpha
Internal Marketing Practices	5	0.891
Customer Loyalty	5	0.902

Source: SPSS Output of Data Analysis on Internal Marketing Practices 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 Spearman's Rank Order Correlation Co-Efficient Statistical Tool was employed to examine the association between the study's dimensions and the criterion variable while the influence of the moderator on the interplay between the predictor and the criterion variables was determined by Partial Correlation.

Table 4: Description of the Degree of Association between Variables

Correlation Coefficient (r)	Description/Interpretation
$\pm 0.80 - 1.0$	Very Strong
$\pm 0.60 - 0.79$	Strong
$\pm 0.40 - 0.59$	Moderate
$\pm 0.20 - 0.39$	Weak
$\pm 0.00 - 0.19$	Very Weak

Source: SPSS Output of Data Analysis on Internal Marketing Practices and Customers Loyalty (2020).

The positive (+) sign in the value of r indicates a direct/positive relationship while the negative (-) sign in the 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 of Internal Marketing Practices and Customer Loyalty

Correlations			Internal marketing Practices	Customer Loyalty
Spearman's rho	Internal marketing Practices	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.754**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.000
		N	85	85
	Customer Loyalty	Correlation Coefficient	.754**	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 Internal Marketing Mechanism and Customers Loyalty (2020)

Table 5 above shows that Spearman's correlation coefficient (r) is = 0.754**, this value is high and shows that; a strong relationship exists between internal marketing practices and customer loyalty. The positive sign of the correlation coefficient shows that the relationship between the variables is positive. Therefore, an increase in loyalty behavior exhibited by the customers is a function of the level of satisfaction derived by the service contacts of the studied healthcare provider firms through the firms' internal marketing practice. As shown in Table 5, the probability value is $(0.000) < (0.05)$ level of significance; hence the researcher rejects the null hypothesis and concludes that internal marketing practices significantly relates to customer loyalty.

Discussion of Findings

Strong Positive Relationship between Work-Life Balance and Customers Loyalty

The study hypothesized that internal marketing practices does not significantly relate to customer loyalty. However, the tested hypothesis showed a strong positive association between internal marketing practices and customer loyalty.

In Table 5, Spearman's correlation coefficient (r) is = 0.754**, this value is high and shows that; a strong relationship exists between internal marketing practices and customer loyalty. This finding coheres with the results of previous studies on internal marketing practices in the

healthcare firms. For instance, Nestor *et al.* (2018) assessed the effect of internal marketing on the organizational commitment of health workers, with the mediating roles of salient job characteristics in this relationship evaluated. Findings showed that, internal marketing makes a significant positive effect on the commitment of health workers. Daniela *et al.* (2012) studied internal marketing in Portuguese Health Care. The findings indicate that the IMS, when used to measure nurses' perceptions of their organizations' internal marketing orientation, was reliable. Efthymios and Constantinou-Vasilios (2011) studied the effect of internal marketing on job satisfaction in health services, particularly in public hospitals in Northern Greece. The findings revealed a significant relationship.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Premised on the finding, the study, conclude that there is a significant relationship between internal marketing practices and customer loyalty. Thus, the study recommends that healthcare firms that seek to improve customer loyalty should consider internal marketing practices as a strategy.

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