

## **CUSTOMER SUPPORT SERVICES AND CUSTOMER POST-COMPLAINT BEHAVIOUR OF HOSPITALS IN NIGERIA.**

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### **Abstract**

*Given the strategic importance of customer support services in the service industry, this paper investigates the behavioural response of customers towards support services of hospitals in Nigeria. Data generated from 120 customers from four hospitals in two major towns in Abia State were analysed using Pearson product moment correlation coefficient and linear regression. Results suggest that customer support services and customer post-complaint behaviour are statistically related. Management of hospitals were therefore advised to focus their efforts on providing prompt and individualized support services that customers perceived as being important in shaping their post-complaint behaviour positively.*

*Keywords: Support services, Customer satisfaction, repurchase intentions, Word-of-mouth, Hospitals.*

### **Introduction**

Sustenance of customer patronage in today's competitive service industry requires a lot of efforts and resources. This has brought unprecedented pressure on the nature and quality of additional services, besides the core service, being rendered by a particular firm (Zeithaml & Bitner, 2000; Mohd, Khaizir, Shamsul & Suhardi, 2009). The additional services, termed customer support service (Hawkins, 2004), play crucial role in enhancing customer's perception of the core service. In some cases, support services are critical to achieving customer satisfaction, even more than the core service itself (Goffin & New, 2001), as support services make it easier and less frustrating in the use of core service (Ross & Edvardsson. 2008).

For customers of hospitals who have difficulties evaluating the core services of hospitals, due largely to the intangibility of services (Okpara, 2012), customer support services of the service provider is an important consideration of the service quality evaluation, and therefore apart of the service itself (Bitner, Ostrom & Morgan, 2008). Since medical care is a service whose purchase does not result in the ownership of any physical object (Kotler & Keller, 2009), there is need for laudable customer support services which, when coordinated and managed over time, produce value for the customer (Bitner et al, 2008) .In view of the forgoing, the aim of this study is to enhance customer post- complaint behaviour of hospitals in Nigeria through customer support services. Thus, customer support service is correlated with post –

complaint behaviour to present empirically-based facts to guide hospital management, especially nowadays that most Nigerian have lost faith in Nigeria's healthcare system (Ewurum, Mgbemena, Nwogwugwu & Kalu, 2015), and would prefer to engage in medical tourism outside the shores of the country, if privileged (Okafor, 2017).

### **Statement of Problem**

"Health is wealth" is a popular saying. Health, as defined in the Constitution of World Health Organization (WHO) adopted in 1943, is a state of complete physical, mental and social wellbeing, and not merely the absence of disease and infinity. As such, modern theory of economic growth acknowledges health with education, as major component of human capital that plays active role in achieving economic growth and development at both household and national levels (Sach, 2001). In view of the forgoing, both developed and developing countries strive to keep abreast of innovations in healthcare delivery, as the sustainability of the social and economic growth of a country lies in healthy human capital (Ewurum et al, 2015).

In view of the importance of healthy human capital in economic development of a nation, the Nigerian health sector is undergoing major reforms aimed at repositioning primary, secondary and tertiary healthcare system for easy access and affordability to all (Okafor, 2017). However, poor healthcare services have continued to be a limitation to adequate healthcare delivery in Nigeria (Mennizibeya, 2011). The above view is in line with the 2009 Communiqué of the Nigerian National Health Conference which states that Nigeria's healthcare system remains weak, as evidenced by lack of coordination, fragmentation of services, dearth of resources, including drugs and supplies, inadequate and decaying infrastructure, inequity in resource distribution, and deplorable quality of service and care. These challenges are reasons privileged Nigerians prefer to seek healthcare services abroad, which gulp over \$1 billion annually (Pharm Access Foundation, 2015). Nigeria is, therefore, in need of a clear-cut framework that would lead to effective and efficient healthcare delivery for overall satisfaction of the populace (Chike, 2006). It is on the basis of the above that this study is significant, as its findings could be used as a strategic framework to reengineer and redesign quality healthcare service processes for improved customer post-complaint behaviour of Nigerian healthcare delivery system.

### **Theoretical Foundation**

This study is anchored on the Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA). TRA is a classic model of persuasion (Sheppard, Hartwick & Warshaw, 1988), which explains the relationship between attitudes and behaviours within human action. It aims at understanding an individual voluntary behaviour (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980). The ideas found within TRA have to do with an individual's basic motivation to performance action (Ibrahim & Vignali, 2005), as a meta-analysis on the application of the theory showed that it can produce good prediction of choices made by an individual when facing several alternatives (Sheppard et al, 1988).

TRA also recognized that there are situations (or factors) that limit the influence of attitude on behaviour (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980). For example, for the purpose of this study, if a person's attitude leads him to want to patronize a particular hospital but perceives no customer support services in the hospital, the lack of support services will prevent the person's attitude from causing him to go to the hospital. The application of the theory to this study is worthwhile, as it explains that a person's intention to perform behaviour is the main predictor of whether or not he actually performs that behaviour (Ibrahim & Vignali, 2005).

## Literature Review

### Customers Support Services

One outstanding feature of Nigeria's healthcare system is poor services (Ewurum et al, 2015; Okafor, 2017). This has led privileged Nigerians to seek medical services in hospital outside the shores of the country, thereby leading to what is commonly referred to as medical tourism (Okafor, 2017). Certainly, the penchant for medical tourism requires the urgency of delivering high – quality services to people that seek medical attention in Nigerian hospitals. This calls for customer support service that would make the service process and experience unique and memorable.

Customer support service is a range of supporting or supplementary services to the core product or service which enhances customer's perception of the product or service (Ross & Edvardsson, 2008). Customer support services are essential because they enable organization to add value to core services, as well as ensure successful management of the interaction between organizations and customers (Goffin & New, 2001). Services that are considered supportive to customers include, but not limited to, reliable services, security, parking space, front desk services, speedy services delivery, after sales services, attentiveness to customers, honesty, good attitude towards customers (Kotler & Keller, 2009), reliable and timely information, courtesy, conducive service environment and timely delivery (Ross & Edvardsson, 2008). They are back-up services that an organization provides to customers (Buttle, 2004) before, during and after the services process (Saeed, Nawaz, Bilal & Iqbal, 2013) to secure sales and maintain customer loyalty (Buttle, 2004). In fact, they are services that make the service process easier and less frustrating (Ross & Edvardsson, 2008).

Customer support services aim at creating memorable interaction in the mind of customers, making them feel better, comfortable and satisfied, as well as stimulating customer retention (Kotler & Keller, 2009). They play important role in an organization's ability to secure customers' confidence and patronage (Oladosu, 2014), and they help customers to know that an organization cares (Nakhjavani, 2010).

Studies on customer support services have reported various pleasant findings, including a means of securing and maintaining customers loyalty (Hussain, Bhatti & Jilani, 2011) generating income (Oladosu, 2014), making customers to feel good (Nakhjavani, 2010), achieving competitive advantage (Saccani, 2006) and customer satisfaction (Tronvoll, 2007), and improving customers' perception about an organization (Buttle, 2004).

### Customer Post- Complaint Behavior

The most important stage of the buyer decision process is the post- complaint behaviour (Ehigie, 2000), as it is the stage of consumers' evaluation of a firm's offer after use (Hansemark & Albinson, 2004). Unlike the purchase stage where the consumer takes decision based on information gathered and evaluated about a firm's offer (Okpara, 2012), the basis for consumers' decision at the post- complaint behaviour stage is on their perception of the ability of the offer to solve their problem (Knox et al, 2013). Thus post-complaint behaviour indicates the nature of the utility derived by a consumer after using a product or service (Awa, Ogwo & Ojiabo, 2015).

The measures of post-complaint behaviour used in this study were adopted from Davidow (2003). They are customer satisfaction; repurchase intentions and word-of-mouth publicity. These measures had also been used in a Nigeria-based study by Awa et al (2015). Customer satisfaction is a product of customer experience – based judgment (Ambler & Kokinaki, 1997) and expectancy confirmation (Oliver, 1996; Labarbera & Mazursky, 1983). Kotler and Keller (2009) define customer satisfaction as a feeling of pleasure, or regret, as a result of someone's comparison of a product's perceived performance (or outcome) with his expectation. It is a measure of how a firm's offer meets or surpasses customers' expectations (Khan, 2012). Consumers leave nothing to chance in their evaluation of services (Stuart, 2006). All activities that allow the service to function effectively are taken into consideration (John & Storey, 1998). In view of the foregoing, most firms are using customer support services to boost customer satisfaction (Saeed et al, 2013).

Most times, satisfied customers tend to patronize the same satisfying brand again to avoid any form of regret (Brodie, Glynn & Little, 2006). Therefore, repurchase intention is the willingness of a customer to repurchase a firm (Swipely, 2012). It also refers to an individual's decision of buying a designated product or service again from a firm he had previous experience with (Cronin & Taylor, 1992). It is the most widely used indicator of customer satisfaction and loyalty (Zhang et al, 2011). Customer support service are important in getting customers satisfied (Goffin & New, 2001), making them happy and encouraging them to patronize the firm again (Oladosu, 2004). The foregoing corresponds with Saeed et al (2013) and Gustavo, Renata and Edar's (2014) view that customers delighted with a firm's support services are more willing to repurchase from the firm.

One of the salient consequences of expectancy confirmation is word-of-mouth publicity (Oliver, 1996). Word-of-mouth publicity is the likelihood of advocacy after a person's evaluation of his expectations of a product or service (Christopher, Payne & Ballantyne, 2002). A firm earns free publicity as customers share their experiences with others (Angelova & Zekiri, 2011), especially those yet to buy from the firm (Awa et al, 2011). Sequel to the above expressions, the following hypotheses were proposed:

H<sub>1</sub>: Customer support services positively relate with customer satisfaction.

H<sub>2</sub>: Customer support services positively relate with repurchase intentions.

H<sub>3</sub>: Customer support services positively relate with word-of-mouth publicity.

### **Research Methodology**

This study was conducted in four hospitals situated in the two biggest cities in Abia State. The hospitals chosen for study were Federal Medical Center (FMC), Umuahia, Amachara General Hospital, Umuahia, Abia State University Teaching Hospital, Aba and New Era Specialist Hospital, Aba. These hospitals were chosen because of their considerable longer experience in healthcare service spanning over 35 years.

The study adopted a cross-sectional survey research design and collected data from a sample of 120 customers from the four hospitals chosen for study, using questionnaire, which was complemented with interviews. Questions were raised with options to find the nature of the correlation of customer support services (predictor variable) and the three dimensional measures of post-complaint behaviour (criterion variables), using a 5-point likert scale on an

ordinary scaled data. The reliability of the research instrument was tested using Cronbach's alpha test. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient of the 25 – item questionnaire, as shown in Table 1, surpassed Nunally's (1978) benchmark of 0.7, thus confirming the reliability (simplicity and consistency) of the research instrument.

**Table 1: Reliability Coefficient of Study Variables**

Cronbach's alpha	Cronbach's alpha based on standardised items.	No. of items
0.857	0.874	25

### Analysis, Results And Discussion

Person product moment correlation and linear regression were used to establish the relationship between the independent variable (customer support services) and the dependent variables (customer satisfaction, repurchase intentions and word-of-mouth publicity).

**Table 2: Result of Correlation Analysis**

		1	2	3	4
Customer support services	Pearson Correlation Sig. (2-tailed)	1			
Customer satisfaction	Pearson Correlation Sig. (2-tailed)	.774** .000	1		
Repurchase intentions	Pearson Correlation Sig. (2-tailed)	.787** .000	.723** .000	1	
Word-of-mouth publicity	Pearson Correlation Sig. (2-tailed)	.698** .000	.721** .000	.698** .000	1

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

N=120

The influence of customer support services on customer post-complaint behaviour of hospitals was investigated using pearson product moment correlation coefficient as shown in Table 2. The results show that customer support services has positive influence on customer satisfaction ( $r=0.774$ ), repurchase intentions ( $r=0.787$ ) and word-of-mouth publicity ( $r=0.698$ ). The results indicate that the application of customer support services in hospitals improves customer post-complaint behaviour. This finding agrees with Saeed et al (2013) and Gustavo et al (2014) that customers who are satisfied with a firm's support services tend to purchase from the firm again and, according to Angelova and Zekiri (2011), also publicise the firm.

**Table 3: Results of Regression Analysis**

	R	Rsquared	Adjusted Rsquared	F	Sig.	$\beta$	Std. Error	$\beta$ standardized	t	Sig.
CS	.567 <sup>a</sup>	.375	.316	112.833	.000 <sup>b</sup>	.518	.047	.511	10.916	.000
RI	.456 <sup>a</sup>	.163	.113	22.754	.000 <sup>b</sup>	.471	.061	.463	4.718	.000
WOM	.498 <sup>a</sup>	.206	.201	42.198	.000 <sup>b</sup>	.502	.058	.487	5.614	.000

- Dependent Variable: customer satisfaction (CS), Repurchase intentions (RI) and Word – of-mouth (WOM)
- Predictor: (constant), customer support services

A linear regression model was used to predict the relationship between the dependent variable and independent variable or predictor. As shown in Table 3,  $R^2$  values of customer satisfaction, repurchase intentions and word-of-mouth were 0.375, 0.163 and 0.206, respectively. These show that customer support services account for 3.5%, 16.3% and 20.6% variation in customer satisfaction, repurchase intentions and word-of-mouth, respectively. Thus, the predictor used in the model captured significant variation in the customer post-complaint behaviour of hospitals in Nigeria. The F-ratio values were significant ( $p < 0.05$ ), leading to rejection of the null hypotheses.

As shown in Table 3, the predicted relationship between customer support services and customer satisfaction was significant ( $\beta = 0.518$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). This indicates that a unit increase in customer support services leads to 0.518 units increase in customer satisfaction. This result, therefore supports our alternate hypothesis one that customer support services positively relate with customer satisfaction. This finding agrees with Saeed et al (2013), and Goffin and New (2001) that customer support services boost customer satisfaction especially in core service-based firms like hospitals (Zain, Bayyurt & Zaim, 2010).

The relationship between customer support services and repurchase intentions was found to positive and significant ( $\beta = 0.471$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). This indicates that for each unit increase in customer support services, there is 0.471 units increase in repurchase intentions. This result supports our alternate hypothesis two that customer supports services positively relate with repurchase intentions. This finding is in line with the findings of Oladosu (2004), Saeed et al (2013) and Gustavo et al (2014) that a firm's support services lead to likely customer repatronage.

The predicted relationship between customer support services and word-of-mouth publicity was also positive and significant ( $\beta = 0.502$ ),  $p < 0.05$ ). This indicates that a unit increase in customer support services leads to 0.502 units increase in word-of-mouth publicity. This result upholds our alternate hypothesis three that customer support services positively relate with word-of-mouth publicity. This finding concurs with the finding of Angelova and Zekiri (2011) that a firm earns free publicity from customers who are delighted with its services.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

This study examines the relationships between customer support services and customer post-complaint behaviour measured by customer satisfaction; repurchase intentions and word-of-mouth publicity. The hypothesized relationships were tested using Pearson product moment correlation coefficient and linear regression, and were significant at  $p < 0.05$ . The results show that customer support services in hospitals leads to customer satisfaction, repatronage and positive word-of-mouth.

In view of the findings, management of hospitals should put in place appropriate support services that would enable customers to assess the core service with ease, thereby making the service process and experience unique and memorable, which consequently lead to repatronage and positive word-of-mouth on the part of customers. These, of course, would lead to improved earnings for the hospital. Further, since hospitals are mostly visited for health-related issues, prompt and individualized support services should be the hallmark of all the service personnel. Against this backdrop, basic knowledge of human relations is needed by all

contact staff. Therefore, management is advised to ensure that the employees are trained and retrained along this line.

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