

# PERCEIVED PROCEDURAL FAIRNESS AND COMPLAINT SATISFACTION OF CUSTOMERS OF EATERIES IN PORT HARCOURT

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## Abstract

*This study investigated the association between perceived procedural fairness and complaint satisfaction of customers of eateries in Port Harcourt. The study assessed perceived procedural fairness in terms of complaining accessibility, prompt response and flexible procedures; while complaint satisfaction was treated unidimensionally. An explanatory research design was adopted; and a structured questionnaire served as the research instrument. The Spearman's rank order correlation served as the test statistic, relying on SPSS version 20.0. The study observed that perceived procedural fairness relates positively and significantly with complaint satisfaction. The study thus concludes that repeat complaint satisfaction depends on complaining accessibility, prompt response and flexible procedures; and recommend that eateries in Port Harcourt that seek to ensure complaint satisfaction for their customers should make their complaint procedures accessible, respond to customers complaints rapidly and adapt their complaint handling procedures to suit the requirements of individual customers.*

**Keywords:** *Complaining accessibility, complaint satisfaction, flexible procedures, perceived procedural fairness, prompt response.*

## Introduction

Service consumers expect quality service all the time; and rightly so. However, things go awry more often than not. The importance of handling complaints in a manner that promote customer satisfaction, and learning from mistakes to improve service delivery is emphasized in literature (Ateke, Asiegbu, & Nwulu, 2015). Service firms thus establish structures to handle customers' complaint properly, when they arise. Efficient complaint handling is essential to service providers because it ensures that customers receive the service the firm promised, and which they are entitled to. Complaints are a valuable source of feedback for firms, providing an audit trail and serving as early warning of service failures (The Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman, 2009). Hence, complaint handling must be led from the top, focused on outcomes, fair and proportionate, and sensitive to the needs of individual customers. Ineffective complaint handling signal double failure,

constitutes an injustice, and furthers the hardship that customers go through.

Complaints, when handled proficiently, provide service and reputation improvement opportunities for firms. Though often faced with the challenge of striking a balance between responding appropriately to complaints and acting proportionately within available resources; prompt and efficient complaint handling can save time and money for the firm by preventing a complaint from escalating unnecessarily. "The unavoidable outcome of ignoring customer issues is that it will expose poor service deliveries of firms to the world, compound otherwise minor issues that could be addressed quickly and decisively to slip through the cracks and allow hasty and often inappropriate decisions to be made" (Ateke et al, 2015). Moreover, learning from current complaints can reduce the number of future occurrences of the phenomenon that led to the complaints.

Complaints provide opportunities for firms to identify problems in their service deliveries, to remedy these problems, influence consumers' perception of their professionalism and customer satisfaction and loyalty (Calin, 2012). Complaints create conflict in the customer-company relationship (Calin, 2012). Dos Santos and Von der Heyde Fernandes (2008) contend that this crisis can be resolved in a manner that assures the continuation of the relationship or deepen it, if customers are not satisfied with the way their complaints are handled. Customers' evaluation of complaint handling encounters is influenced by their perception of how they have been treated. The fairness of complaint handling encounters strongly assuage dissatisfied customers and secures their continued patronage, even as proper complaint handling is argued to influence perceived quality, improve service quality as well as impact on customer retention (Ateke, Ogonu, & Ismael, 2015; Stauss & Schoeler, 2004).

Relying on the concept of perceived justice, several studies have been conducted to identify the variables customers consider most important, and determine their nexus with customers' satisfaction with firms' complaint handling practices. Ateke and Harcourt (2018) studied the nexus between perceived interactional fairness and repeat purchase intention of eatery customers. Ogonu and Nwogu (2018) studied the relationship between interactional justice and post-complaint behaviour in the fastfood industry. Relatedly, Ngahu, Kibera, and Kobonyo (2016) investigated the connection between interactional justice and recovery satisfaction among customers of mobile money. Ateke et al (2015) on their part investigated the link between perceived justice initiatives and post-complaint satisfaction. With a view to contributing to the existing stock of knowledge therefore, the current study focuses on investigating the nexus between perceived procedural fairness and complaint satisfaction of customers of eateries in Port Harcourt.

## Literature Review and Hypotheses Development

### Perceived Procedural Fairness

*Complaint handling processes should be clear and straightforward and readily accessible to customers. They should be well managed throughout the firm so that decisions are reached quickly, things put right where necessary and lessons learnt for service improvement* (The Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman, 2009). Perceived procedural fairness results from the objectivity of the procedures that an organization uses to arrive at resolutions to customer complaints. It describes the justness with which service personnel implement policies and rules of the organization consistently, and without bias (Colquitt, 2001). Customers assess the fairness of the procedures firms use in handling complaints based on the promptness with which established structures of complaint resolution attend to them and offer meaningful explanations (Yuliant, 2015). When consumers hold a fair perception of the complaint resolution procedures of the firm, the evaluation of the attractiveness of the firm's procedures is enhanced, and this influences complaint satisfaction and behavioural intentions (Maertz, Baur, Mosley, Posthuma, & Campion, 2004).

The methods a firm use to resolve customer complaints and the accessibility, promptness and flexibility of the methods give the customer a sense of being well-treated (Nikbin, Ismail, Marimuthu, & Jalalkamali, 2010). The fairness of the process is premised on the policies and procedures the firm uses to support communication with customers and specifically, the time taken to process complaints and to arrive at a decision (Davidow, 2003). Perceived procedural fairness is therefore a function of the customer's perception of fairness of the procedures and processes utilized in resolving a complaint (Mattila & Cranage, 2005); and stems from the data gathering and data usage of the firm, as well as the opportunities customers have to make a point (Ateke & Kalu, 2017). Ateke et al (2015) posits that effective complaint resolution foster complaint satisfaction and customer loyalty

while failure to meet customers' expectation of fairness in the complaint resolution triggers perception of unfairness and breeds dissatisfaction. Therefore, the processes leading to complaint resolution should not be stressful. Customers should not be made to wait unendingly because customers wait perceptions influence their service evaluation in terms of quality and satisfaction (von Bergh et al, 2015). Complaining accessibility, flexible procedures and prompt response to complaints are used as dimensions of perceived procedural fairness in this study, based on the assertion that these constitute major planks of customers' perception of procedural fairness (Quy, 2014; Chen, 2007).

### **Complaining Accessibility**

Complaining accessibility according to Ateke and Kalu (2017) represents the relative ease with which complaints procedure can be accessed and utilized by service customers at all times. Complaining accessibility connotes that complaint handling structures are not available only when customers wish to lodge complaints; but open and accessible at all times. It is thus incumbent on service firms to consider the most effective ways to ensure maximum accessibility to their complaint handling procedures. Complaining accessibility also means that customers should not spend money to lodge a formal complaint; and that the complaint procedure will not be time consuming (Ateke & Kalu, 2017). This may include placing information in waiting areas where customers can see them. Complaints leaflets can also be helpful and organizations may consider where these can most effectively be displayed. Essentially, complaining accessibility represents the ease with which procedures needed to get recompense for a failed service can be accessed by customers.

### **Prompt Response**

Promptness of response to customer complaints is another aspect of the service recovery process that determines customers' perception of procedural fairness. The length of time it takes the firm to process customers' complaint and resolves them influences procedural fairness. It may

therefore not be ideal for firms to require customers to fill out extensive forms, and undergo daunting procedures; as this may give customers the impression that the firm does not intend to correct the situation at hand in the shortest possible time (Díez, Montecinos, Delgado, Henandez, & Fernandez, 2007). Promptness of response addresses the policies, procedures, and tools that companies use to support communication with customers and specifically, the time taken to process complaints and to arrive at a decision (Davidow, 2003).

### **Flexible Procedures**

The concept of flexibility in complaint handling suggests that the methods firms use to handle problems arising from service failure are adaptable to the peculiarities of individual customer's recovery needs (Ateke & Kalu, 2017; Nikbin et al, 2010). Schuler and Jackson (1999) posit that flexibility of procedures represents the extent to which the firm adapts its complaint handling procedures and policies to satisfy the requirement of individual customers. The nature and intensity of competition in the business-scape dictate that firms provide their services in an effective and efficient manner. Adopting a flexible complaint handling procedure that caters for the needs of individual customer expectations is thus essential (Schmidt, 2006). Customers have different needs and demand customized services (Krizan, Merrier, Logan, & Williams, 2008); therefore, firms' processes must be designed to meet different customer needs. Service processes innately entail interactions between service providers and customers. Flexible procedures are very important in driving these interactions. Also, "service processes have to be flexible in order to deal with current customers' requirements, and also ensure satisfaction for prospective customers. Krizan et al (2008) posits that in instances where flexibility is difficult due to company policies, managers must respond to customers explaining the reason for the existing policy, rather than use the policy as a reason for their action.

### **Complaint Satisfaction**

Complaint satisfaction describes the extent to which the complaint handling efforts of the firm meet or exceed customers' expectation and assuage their angst following unsatisfactory experiences (Ateke et al, 2015). It is the sense of satisfaction consumers have after a complaint resolution episode (Mansfield & Warwick, 2000). Complaint satisfaction is also conceptualized as the satisfaction complainants have with a firm's response to their complaints. Failure of firms to meet expected standards upset customers. However, complaint behaviour is triggered mostly by firms' inability to address the issue immediately (Chang, Lee, & Tseng, 2008). More so, if the failure occurs in the core service; since core service failure is the main cause of customer defection and hostile behaviour (Hoffman & Kelly, 2000). The goal of service recovery however, is to move a customer from a state of dissatisfaction to a state of satisfaction (Nikbin et al, 2010).

Ensuring that customers get fair treatment in the event of service failure delivers post complaint satisfaction and induce loyalty behaviours. Ngahu, Kibera, and Kobonyo, (2016) states that complaint satisfaction impacts customers' evaluation of service providers and correlate strongly with retention and loyalty. When customers get committed to a relationship, they are likely to forgive a poor service experience (Priluck, 2003) and remain loyal to the relationship. Research indicate that customers exhibit higher levels of trust and commitment when they are assuaged through adequate complaint handling practices that foster complaint satisfaction (Priluck, 2003). Trust, commitment, loyalty and citizenship behaviours are identified as relationship sequences that follow customer's delight following competent complaint handling (Ateke & Harcourt, 2017).

The satisfaction complainants derive from companies' responses go by several descriptions including satisfaction with the remedy (Harris et al, 2006), satisfaction with service recovery (Maxham & Netemeyer, 2003), overall complaint satisfaction (Stauss, 2002), recovery disconfirmation

(McCollough, Berry, & Yadav, 2000), recovery satisfaction (Boshoff, 1999), satisfaction with complaint resolution (Andreassen, 1999), secondary satisfaction (Etzel & Silverman, 1981), complaint response satisfaction (Blodgett & Granbois, 1992), among others. The underlying idea in these aliases is the confirmation or disconfirmation of the complaint response, and in all cases, means that customers compare their perception of the actual performance of the complaint handling procedures with their expectations towards that performance.

### **Perceived Procedural Fairness and Complaint Satisfaction**

Customer dissatisfaction breeds complaint behaviour. The processes utilized in complaint handling create avenues for service improvement, customer satisfaction and boosts company reputation. Procedural fairness ensues from the promptness and ease with which firms handle customer complaints (Gelbrich & Roschk, 2011). Prompt facilitation of complaint resolution and the ability of the firm to control the complaint-handling processes efficiently also determine process satisfaction in the complaint resolution encounter (Gelbrich & Roschk, 2011). Firms stand to benefit the most when customers complain to them directly. This is because it could be injurious to the firm if customers complain to third parties or take their exit. Firms must thus encourage customers to complain when they have cause to do so, by making the complaint process less strenuous.

Customers' derive satisfaction from their perception of the rightness of the procedures used in arriving at an outcome for their complaints (Davidow, 2003). Satisfaction with the complaint handling process is further determined by the extent to which customers believe that the process has been objective and represents their aspiration (Goodwin & Ross, 1990). Consumers attach as much importance to the outcome of the complaint handling as they do to the processes that leads to the outcomes. They use the complaint handling process to evaluate the firm (Davidow, 2003), hence all tools, policies and procedure that the firm

institute to facilitate complaint handling, and the promptness of the processes must be accorded adequate attention.

Customers that are dissatisfied with the way firms handle their complaints engage in public or private actions. The behaviour customers enact when they derive satisfaction from the way their complaints are handled has also been a subject of interest to researchers and practitioners alike. Previous studies suggest that customers derive satisfaction from firms' complaint handling practices of firms that they deem fair. For instance, Ateke and Harcourt (2018) observed that perceived interactional fairness have a positive and significant relationship with repeat purchase intention. Relatedly, Ateke and Kalu (2017) observe that complaining accessibility and complaint satisfaction are strongly correlated. In another study, Ogonu and Nwogu (2018) observe a strong positive relationship between interactional justice and complaint behaviour in the fast-food industry. Also, Ngahu, Kibera, and Kobonyo (2016) observe that interactional justice is a predictor of recovery satisfaction among customers of mobile money services in Kenya. Furthermore, in a study on perceived justice initiative and customers' complaint satisfaction in the fastfood industry, Ateke et al (2015) observe that procedural justice correlate strongly with complaint satisfaction. Based on the foregoing, the current study proposes as follows:

**H<sub>1</sub>:** Complaining accessibility significantly correlate with complaint satisfaction of customers of eateries in Port Harcourt.

**H<sub>2</sub>:** Promptness of response to complaints significantly correlates with complaint satisfaction of customers of eateries in Port Harcourt.

**H<sub>3</sub>:** Flexible of complaint procedures significantly correlate with complaint satisfaction of customers of eateries in Port Harcourt.

### Methodology

This study focuses on determining the nexus between perceived procedural fairness and complaint satisfaction. The study adopted an explanatory research design; and employed questionnaire as the instrument of inquiry. The study was conducted in a non-contrived setting. Hence, the researchers do not have control over the research elements. The population of the study comprised of customers of eateries in Port Harcourt. Data collected from three hundred and fifty-four (354) customers of eateries was utilized in the study. The accidental sampling technique was employed in view of its merits in easing access to test units (Collis & Hussey, 2009). The validity of the study instruments was confirmed through the opinion of a jury of experts consisting of academics and practitioners with adequate knowledge of the subject of the study, while the internal consistency of the measurement items of was confirmed through the Cronbach's Alpha test of reliability with a threshold of 0.70 set by Nunnally (1978). Table 1 below presents the summary of the reliability results.

**Table 1: Summary of the Reliability Result**

S/N	Variable	No of items	Cronbach's Alpha
1.	Complaining Accessibility	6	.822
2.	Prompt Response	8	.781
3.	Flexible Procedures	6	.711
4.	complaint Satisfaction	7	.767

**Source: Simulation from SPSS Output on Data Analysis on Perceived Procedural Fairness and Complaint Satisfaction (2018).**

The study used the Spearman's rank order correlation (rho) as the test statistic. All analyses was done using SPSS version 20.0. The key for

interpretation considered appropriate for the correlation (r) of the study variables was the categorization set by Evans (1996), where: 0.0-

0.19 = very weak; 0.20-0.39 = weak; 0.40-0.59 = moderate; 0.60-0.79 = strong; and 0.80-1.0 = very strong. The interpretation process was subject to 0.01 (two tail) level of significance.

## Results and Discussions

**Table 2: Correlation analysis of the relationship between Complaining Accessibility and Complaint Satisfaction**

			Correlations	
			Complaining Accessibility	Complaint Satisfaction
Spearman's rho	Complaining Accessibility	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.925**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.000
		N	354	354
	Complaint Satisfaction	Correlation Coefficient	.925**	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.
		N	354	354

\*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Source: SPSS Output on Data Analysis on Perceived Procedural Fairness and Complaint Satisfaction (2018).

Table 2 above shows that the Spearman's correlation coefficient of the link between complaining accessibility and complaint satisfaction is 0.925\*\*. This high coefficient implies that a strong relationship exists between the variables. The positive sign of the correlation coefficient suggests that the link between complaining accessibility and complaint satisfaction is a positive one. This implies that eatery customers will derive more satisfaction from their complaint resolution encounter with service providers if the complaint procedures are very accessible. The probability value of the association between the variables is 0.00 which is less than 0.05 level of significance. This suggests that the association between variables is statistically significant. The study thus

accepts the alternate hypothesis and avers that a significant relationship exists between complaining accessibility and complaint satisfaction of customers of eateries in Port Harcourt. Accessibility of the complaints procedures is therefore significantly important for customers. This observation tallies with the observation of Ateke and Kalu (2017) that complaint accessibility influences complaint satisfaction. This observation also confirm the position of Ramphal (2016) that customers attach importance to the accessibility of complaint procedures and that of Calin (2012) that customers are particularly keen about the accessibility of complaint procedures in terms of location, communication channels and availability of personnel.

**Table 3: Correlation analysis of the relationship between Prompt Response and Complaint Satisfaction****Correlations**

			Prompt Response	Complaint Satisfaction
Spearman's rho	Prompt Response	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.815**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.000
		N	354	354
	Complaint Satisfaction	Correlation Coefficient	.815**	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.
		N	354	354

**\*\*.** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

**Source: SPSS Output on Data Analysis on Perceived Procedural Fairness and Complaint Satisfaction (2018).**

The result of the test of association between prompt response and complaint satisfaction as displayed on Table 3 indicated that a strong correlation exist between the variables. This is on account of the correlation coefficient of .815\*\*generated by the test. The positive sign of the correlation coefficient suggests that the nexus between prompt response and complaint satisfaction is a positive one. This denotes that the faster firms are in responding to customers' complaints, the more satisfied customers will be about their complaint handling experience. The probability value of 0.00 which is less than 0.05 level of significance generated by the test suggests that the link between prompt response and

complaint satisfaction is statistically significant. The study thus accepts the alternate hypothesis and posits that a significant relationship exists between truthfulness and repeat purchase intention. This finding corroborates the observation that customers accord importance to rapid response when their complaints are characterised by high emergency (Calin, 2012). Responding promptly to customers' complaint assuages their angst and informs complaint satisfaction and improves retention. This finding of the current study re-echoes the assertion that prompt response to customer complaints is an important predictor of customers' perception of procedural fairness which builds trust and customer engagement.

**Table 4: Correlation analysis of the relationship between Flexible Procedures and Complaint Satisfaction**

			Flexible Procedures	Complaint Satisfaction
Spearman's rho	Flexible Procedures	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.875**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.000
		N	354	354
	Complaint Satisfaction	Correlation Coefficient	.875**	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.
		N	354	354

**\*\*.** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

**Source: SPSS Output on Data Analysis on Perceived Procedural Fairness and Complaint Satisfaction (2018).**

Table 4 displays the result of the test of relationship between flexible procedures and complaint satisfaction. The correlation coefficient of .875\*\* generated by the test illustrates that there is a strong correlation between the variables. The positive sign of the correlation coefficient suggests that the connection between prop flexible procedures and complaint satisfaction is a positive one. This means that the more flexible complaint procedures are, the more satisfied customer will be with the complaint resolution experience. The probability value of 0.00 of the test result is less than 0.05 level of significance; implying that the association between flexible procedures and complaint satisfaction is statistically significant. Thus, the study accepts the alternate hypothesis and posits that a significant relationship exists between flexible procedures and complaint satisfaction. This observation coheres with the assessment of Calin (2012) that service personnel

should address customers individually; addressing their particular needs, wants and feelings and adapt the complaint resolution process to the specific personal circumstances of the customers and the statement that firms cannot take a rigid, process-driven, one-size-fits-all approach to complaint handling; that that must ensure that responses are tailored to fit individual customer's complaints, taking into account the seriousness of the issues complained about, the effect on the complainant, and whether any others may have suffered injustice or hardship as a result of the same problem (Ramphal, 2016).

#### **Conclusion and Recommendation**

Complaint satisfaction affects customers' assessment of service providers and informs post-complaint behaviours, including brand evangelism. Returning customers to satisfaction and restoring relationships after a service glitch is a needful competence for service firms in the contemporary



business-scape. Firms thus evolve complaints handling strategies that are considered essential for customers; and which offer learning opportunities for service improvement. Procedural fairness which emphasizes accessibility, process flexibility and rapid response in the complaint handling process is one of such strategies commonly deployed by firms to deliver post-complaint satisfaction and inform positive post-complaint behaviours.

Based on the results of the test conducted, and the discussion of findings presented above, the study concludes that a positive and statistically significant nexus exists between perceived procedural fairness and complaint satisfaction of customers of eateries; or that complaint satisfaction of eatery customers depend on complaining accessibility, prompt response to complaints and flexible complaint procedures. The study thus recommend that eateries in Port Harcourt that seek to ensure complaint satisfaction for their customers should make their complaint procedures accessible, respond to customers complaints rapidly and adapt their complaint handling procedures to suit the requirements of individual customers.

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